Already a key component of sustainable development policies, the alleviation of inequalities within and between countries also stands as a policy goal, and deserves to take centre stage of the Sustainable Development Goals, agreed during the Rio+20 Summit in 2012.

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Inequality reduction does not occur by decree; neither does it automatically arise through economic growth, nor through policies that equalize incomes downward via blind taxing and spending. Inequality reduction involves a collaborative effort that must motivate all concerned parties, one that constitutes a genuine political and social innovation, and one that often runs counter to prevailing political and economic forces.
Citizens’ awareness of their “well-understood self interest” can be erased by manipulating their concern for equity. Agitators and lobbyists regularly block important reforms that would benefit the disadvantaged, strengthening low-growth trends that generate inequalities, not jobs. The author calls for space for public debate to counter the diabolical game, which drags attention away from society’s challenges.

Killing carbon tax with the equity argument - Lessons from the Sarkozy tax

This paper will attempt to show the mechanisms by which arguments based on equity have played a central role in the failure of the carbon tax project under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy. One can argue that these mechanisms are partly specific to the French institutional framework, to a precise politico-media cycle and a somewhat unusual presidency style that put the emphasis on media announcements rather than on social consultation, which was suspected of being a strategy to slow the pace of reforms. Without, I hope, falling into the trap of thinking that what happens in France automatically has universal value, I will show that the effectiveness of arguments mobilized to counter the project is indicative of broader fundamental problems that go beyond the “carbon tax” project. These problems are those of the blocking of reforms, at national or international scales, through the manipulation of the concern for equity in a media-crazed world where the primacy given to the consumer obscures the “best interests” of the citizen.

From general consensus to a blitzkrieg that was rapidly lost

The story of “Sarkozy’s climate contribution” begins on 31st January 2007 when five of the presidential candidates¹, including the three that received the most votes in the first round (N. Sarkozy, S. Royal and F. Bayrou), signed an “ecological pact” that included a carbon tax proposal, that was drawn up by Nicolas Hulot, the host and producer of a renowned television programme, Ushuaia. Once elected, N. Sarkozy

¹. These candidates gathered a total of 78.51% of the votes in the first round.

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confirmed his commitment during the closing of the *Grenelle* Environment Forum on 25th October 2007, and once again during his presidential vows in January 2009. The political context seemed favourable: the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency gave hope during the late-2009 Copenhagen conference that it might be possible to unblock the climate negotiations that had been becalmed by G. W. Bush; while the 15.8% of votes gained by Europe Ecology in the European elections in May 2009 at last reflected a rise in environmental concern among the public.

Finally, the choice of Michel Rocard, former Socialist Prime Minister, as Chairman of the preparation of the climate-energy contribution (CEC) indicated a willingness for a transpartisan compromise, while the appointment of Yves Martin to assist him – a senior official who has supported this idea since 1990 – was a guarantee of technical seriousness and sincerity. Conferences of experts met in early July and the Rocard report was submitted on 28th July; he advocated an immediate rate of €32 per tonne of carbon emitted that should reach €100 in 2030. M. Rocard said: “There is something extraordinary, totally unexpected for a society as confrontational as ours, in the consensus expressed by almost all experts from all sides involved in these discussions” (p. 67). The problem is therefore to understand how, within a period of just six months, we moved from this apparent consensus to the invalidation by the Constitutional Council on 29th December of a bill that the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate had definitively voted in favour of on 18th December, and to the permanent abandonment of the project by Prime Minister Francois Fillon on 23rd March 2010, about a year after its launch.

To fully comprehend these events, we must return to two important recommendations of the Rocard report, namely the absence of exemptions and the enactment of a social negotiation process to clarify the use of the revenue, accompanied by “the implementation of an appropriate governance on a multiannual perspective, comparable to the “Green Tax Commissions” that exist in other countries, in order to institutionalize this need for governance, assess its impact and determine how this revenue is used. Admittedly, in January, N. Sarkozy had announced that the carbon tax would be used to finance the reduction of the professional tax, a local tax paid by businesses that was unanimously considered as particularly distortionary. This announcement led to the presentation of the carbon tax as an indirect means to give a “gift to the employers” and was therefore denounced by labour unions. But the Rocard report put things back into perspective by giving prominence to usages of the tax that included a reduction of social charges, and using among others a study of the CIRED to back it (COMBET et al., 2009). Everything therefore remained open for negotiation: at this stage the second largest French union, the CFDT, had officially given its support, while the largest union, the CGT, had not vetoed the proposals.

The defeat of the bill stems back to the beginning of July when, from the angle of protecting consumers from rising energy prices and the mobilization of an anti-tax reflex, the Consumer Association, *UFC Que Choisir*, through the voice of François Carlier became very prominent in the media, calling for the handover of the tax revenue to households. The *Fondation Nicolas Hulot*, which had the ear of the
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president, was convinced that this option, which combined social justice and budget neutrality, would be the only one likely to be accepted by the public and would enable a rapid adoption of the CEC. On 5th July the Minister of Ecology Jean-Louis Borloo, to avoid being accused of inventing a new tax grab, then argued in Le Point magazine for the idea of a “green cheque” to be given to households with equal retrocession of payments. Then, on 6th July, the Budget Minister Eric Woerth declared his opposition to this idea in La Tribune. This clash rendered obsolete, prior to its emergence, the recommendation of a negotiation on the use of such a tax: the recommendation fell on deaf ears when it was released on 28th July and was definitively buried.

The mechanism that would lead to failure had been triggered. Public opinion did not understand the logic of a reform where money taken from them could be given back; on 3rd September, a survey by TNS Sofres showed that two out of three French people declared themselves opposed to the CEC. While employers highlighted the competitiveness argument and the additional costs of the carbon tax when companies do not benefit from other lower taxes. Technical points were debated in the heat of the moment before the Head of State made a decision on 10th September to implement zero taxation on electricity, provision of a green cheque to households, and exemption for industries covered by the European Emissions Trading scheme (EU-ETS). Failure was now inevitable, due to the inclusion of exemptions that the Rocard report had strongly urged against.

However, companies that are subject to the EU-ETS (i.e. the highest emitters), are only required to pay the European market-determined carbon price in the event that they exceed their allocated free quota. This leads to tax inequality, as highlighted by the Constitutional Council: “the significance [of the exemptions in relation to major emitters] was such that it was contrary to the objective of fighting against global warming and has created a characterized fracture of equality in terms of the public burden”. While the butcher or the carpenter would have to pay tax on their first tonne of emissions, the steel and chemical industries would only be liable for their excess emissions. This gives weight to the argument of tax inequality that the Constitutional Council had already used in 1998 against a carbon tax proposal by the Jospin government. F. Fillon abandoned the project on 23rd March and on the 24th March, N. Sarkozy “subordinated the creation of a domestic carbon tax to a tax at the borders”.

Certainly, one can accuse Sarkozy’s method for this defeat, but in doing so, we would not draw any useful lessons. One may indeed wonder why the Greens or the Socialist Party (whose candidates had signed the N. Hulot pact) did not mobilize to demand a negotiation around the carbon tax, and simply welcomed the withdrawal of a tax that was considered as antisocial, without offering an alternative project for a tax that would fit better into the overall project, and did not campaign on the carbon tax during the last presidential election. In fact, the failure of the Sarkozy carbon tax is indicative of two more general problems: the first relates directly to the profession of economists and their ability to respond effectively to issues of fairness, the second concerns the way in which the media process “informs” citizens.
Did the economists lack pedagogy on the equity-efficiency links?

The mechanics of the failure of the Sarkozy carbon tax can be likened to a double-bladed razor: the first blade, that of the fairness argument, can be said to “raise the hair”; while the second one, that of the arguments of competitiveness, is the blade that “cuts it”. This can only raise questions for economists who, for more than 20 years, have been involved in the development of some models of reasoning in “general equilibrium”. The results of these models are certainly not consensual, but they are more than sufficient to show how the idea of a green cheque given to households is counter-productive and ignores the fact that, because of economic interdependencies, the one who pays a tax is not necessarily the one who bears the ultimate cost. This means, in practical terms, that a redistribution measure that is apparently equitable may eventually have consequences contrary to its stated objective.

This was the case of the “green cheque” as it was presented in the heat of the
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moment. A fee of €20 for each tonne of CO₂ that a consumer is directly responsible for would also affect companies, which will charge this extra cost to customers; this cost would be spread from sector to sector with an amplification effect on the price of final products, and a green cheque of €20 per tonne delivered to a consumer to offset rising energy costs would not compensate for the increase in prices that the extra cost of energy will have caused for the rest of the consumer’s purchases. The use of the carbon tax to decrease the social charges is necessary to block this mechanism, thus offsetting the extra cost of energy by reducing the labour costs. Without this compensation, the €100 per tonne (planned for 2030 in the CEC project) that is necessary to truly “decarbonise” our economies would cause an unbearable additional cost.

Economists may bear some of the responsibility for the way in which the public and the policy makers understand the simple reality of these propagation mechanisms. If one takes stock of two decades of work on the carbon tax, the importance of the “double dividend” is striking, i.e. the fact that by using the revenue of a carbon tax to reduce the most distortionary taxes, we could have, in addition to improving the environment, an economic dividend in the form of an increase in employment activity. Opposing this theory were the many reflexes from within a profession that is always wary, with good reason, of anything resembling a “free lunch”. In this case, it was important to avoid the creation of the illusion of a miracle tax, one that would solve economic problems, especially those in terms of employment. L. Goulder had introduced in 1995 a very useful distinction between “strong form” and “weak form” of the double dividend by showing that the first was not automatic and depended on specific conditions, but it should not make us forget the second, namely that an environmental tax was necessary to reduce the economic and social costs of environmental policies.

But this was not enough, and tension amongst theoretical economists continued, they pointed out that a double dividend was not possible in a so-called first best economy i.e. using optimally its resources (Hourcade and Robinson, 1996) and criticized the empirical models for working on second-best economies for which economic science does not provide generalizable theoretical solutions. A second complaint, collateral to the first, is that these models only point to a double dividend assuming that the introduction of a carbon tax is carried out in parallel with reforms that have not been undertaken so far; they therefore attribute to the carbon tax the dividend of reforms that should have been adopted independently of climate policies. This argument is encapsulated in the provocatively titled paper “The double dividend is dead” by Bovenberg (2000)².

We can wonder whether this “tension” in the debates between “theorists” and “empiricists” is particularly relevant when one sees that the empirical models generally find modest increases in GDP, rarely above 2% over the long term, the

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2. In the French debate, this position was echoed by K.Schubert (2010), and in a very nuanced way by Guesnerie (2010).
employment figures being more significant. The issue of double-dividend is numerically secondary with respect to the propagation effects of a carbon tax and the need, in order to control these effects, to use the product of this tax to reduce levies that ultimately weigh on production costs. What has been lacking in the public debate is a good understanding of this point, which induces the “weak form” of the double-dividend as an undisputed theoretical result. CIRED’s IMACLIM model shows that a strong form is possible in France, due to the proportion of the tax that implicitly hits annuity incomes and oil imports. But this is not the essential element; the important issue was to clearly explain the need to control the spread of rising energy costs and the fact that, without this control, the green cheque was an illusory gift.

This lack of pedagogy is perhaps due to an intellectual posture that makes sense as a step in the analysis of general equilibrium effects of a carbon tax, but not to calculate the real cost of a measure. This posture, which requires consideration on the basis of a leading universe (that is to say, assuming all the reforms are carried out to lead to optimal taxation and full use of factors of production), leads to an argument that is somewhat scholastic. In a given historical period, the only relevant question is whether a carbon tax, because it brings revenue that has to be used, facilitates or otherwise the implementation of reforms that have not been undertaken so far. Such as, for example, the reduction of social security contributions.

This structuring of the debate may be at the origin of the difficulties in giving equity issues the appropriate consideration. Indeed, in a leading universe, the solution is to make compensatory transfers towards households adversely affected by a reform; there is “separability between equity and efficiency”. However, in the real world, this separability is far from being realized. Figure 1 shows its issues. Taken from a simulation by the IMACLIM-S model, that was used for the Rocard study, it provides a comparative analysis of the situation in France in 2004 if a carbon tax had been enacted 20 years earlier to reach the level of €300/tCO₂, depending on whether this tax would have been given back to the consumer in the form of a green cheque or used to reduce the social security contributions. It provides the comparison of four criteria (GDP, employment, consumption of the poorest 5% of the French population, and the Gini coefficient), the baseline situation before tax being described by the dotted square.

It is immediately clear that the use of revenue to decrease social security contributions (black diamond) allows very significant improvement in employment, significant growth of GDP and incomes of poor households, but leads to more inequality.

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3. At the time of writing, the French government is initiating a downward trend in social security contributions, through increased value-added tax (VAT), which affects consumption, and through the increase in the Generalized Social Contribution (CSG), which is a form of income tax. The limits of these increases will appear very quickly, i.e. pressure on the purchasing power for the first increase, resistance of the middle and upper classes for the second. Compared to these solutions, we have shown in our work that a carbon tax has a similar effect to that of an increase in VAT and has the advantage of decreasing energy imports; the only valid question is then whether the carbon tax will be politically accepted as a means to diversify funding sources to lower social security contributions.
This result can be explained by a virtuous circle: the transfer of the tax burden on income from rents, higher salaries, lower labour costs, increased exports, lower imports (on top of the decrease in oil imports). This allows an increase in employment which is of sufficient benefit to disadvantaged segments of the population to compensate for the decline in purchasing power caused by the higher energy costs. But this device aggravates inequality (Gini coefficient degradation) because the wealthier strata dedicate a significantly less amount to energy than that which is spent by the disadvantaged. The egalitarian “green cheque” device improves the Gini coefficient, since wealthier households receive a cheque lower than the amount they have paid out, while the opposite is true for poor households. But there are negative points: it comes at the expense of growth and no gain in employment due to the degradation of production costs; rising domestic consumption triggered by the higher incomes of the disadvantaged cannot compensate for the loss in competitiveness; and, in addition, a fact that does not appear in this graph, there is a decline in investment and a higher level of national debt.

The terms of arbitration on the use of the money from the tax thus clearly appear and the goal of the social negotiation, that was recommended by the Rocard study, was precisely to see the emergence of solutions to allow compromise, with some of the tax revenue targeted towards the most vulnerable households and another part focused on the lowering of charges. However, such a substitution between carbon tax and the social security contributions could not be dissociated from the negotiations on wages and on the financing of social protection. This is a politically sensitive issue because it affects the “equal representation” between employers and trade unions in the management of social security. An important point for the starting of a virtuous economic circle is the proportion of the decrease in contributions which employees can benefit from in the form of net wage increases without preventing the decrease in production costs.

It is in this search for a compromise that two sensitive issues could have been addressed. The first is the specific arrangements for certain activities, not only those covered by the European system of tradable emission permits, but also very vulnerable activities such as fishing or mountain agriculture. The second is the importance of location in the vulnerability to energy prices. Figure 2, which is drawn from a survey of 35,000 households, shows that the share of energy expenditure in the household budget is based on income, but that its variability within the same income class is high. This is because the energy requirements are very specific to the place of residence, not only for climate issues, but also and especially for issues of dependency on economic mobility, which is highly variable depending on whether you live in the centre of Paris, where the combination of metro plus walking is very effective, or far out in the suburbs or in the mountains.

In fact, the heterogeneity of situations is a concern to economists because the scheme of compensation through money transfers to take this into account quickly leads to very complex administrative solutions, which pave the way for endless lobbying. We can only find a solution by expanding the scope of the negotiations
so that what one social category loses through its energy bill, is regained on access to employment, rental costs, lower (or at least not increased) other charges, and for economically vulnerable occupations (agriculture, mountain pastoralism, fishing) an institutional framework that gives them the prospect of true economic viability. In other words, the basic reductions of carbon tax or monetary transfers are not the only tools by which the “losers” of the reform can be compensated. The major political advantage of the Rocard proposal for a specific governance on the use of the CEC revenue was the forced reconnection of issues, fears and expertise, including by encouraging specialists of retirement funding, public debt, health or social housing to examine the potential offered by environmental taxation and the complementary measures to adopt (the insulation of buildings, for example) to make it a “win-win” device, what economists call “Pareto-improving”.

The dictatorship of the immediate, its reasons and modalities
The above shows why forcing the adoption of a carbon tax outside of any social negotiation could only lead to failure. The episode of the Sarkozy carbon tax is a perfect counter-example of the success of the Swedish tax, which is described in this publication by Thomas Sterner. However, this does not explain the collapse of the idea of such a tax, or the fact that it was not used by the opposition parties, and neither does it explain why the equity argument was so effective, even though it could be easily disproved.

We must firstly underline here an element of psychological context. When decisions were to be made on the carbon tax, the media hype over the climate issue suddenly stopped after the failure of Copenhagen. This can be explained by the discouragement felt by those whose expectations had been overly high. There was also a suspicion that the climate issue was not particularly serious, or was even a sham, as suggested in the title of Claude Allègre’s bestseller, which was published in February 2010. It is irrelevant that Allègre relied on distorted documents or that the Academy of Sciences had refuted his arguments. The important element is the mistrust vis-à-vis the predicted disasters and the anti-environmentalist reflex that was revealed by the success of this book. This reflex can be easily understood if we remind ourselves of the historical examples of prophets of doom that were proved wrong, and of course, the figure of Cassandra that the Trojans refused to believe. Such a reflex is all the more to be expected given that the population feels threatened by a financial crisis for which it feels no responsibility for, and which fears unemployment. If climate warnings are presented as catastrophes, they do not allow “enlightened catastrophism” (Dupuy, 2002). If people feel they have their backs to

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4. Claude Allègre: The Climate fraud or false ecology, Plon, February 2010. Former Minister of Lionel Jospin’s government, a member of the Academy of Sciences, Claude Allègre is a French example of a “merchant of doubt”; as a columnist in some influential newspapers, he was frequently invited during this period to voice his opinions on radio and television. Having approached Nicolas Sarkozy, he asked that the French Academy of Sciences should rule on the issue, which it did by certifying the scientific character of the work on climate change.
the wall, there is no room for choice and they become very receptive to rhetoric that presents environmental taxes as punitive and guilt-apportioning.

The effectiveness of Ségolène Royal’s position, the runner up in the second-last presidential election as the leader of the Socialist Party, against the carbon tax is very symptomatic: she argued during a television debate (“À vous de juger” on France 2, 25th March 2010): “If you put a tax on people before they have a choice – to buy an electric car or take public transport – it is very unfair.” In essence, an easy response to this view is that it is precisely the low oil prices since 1983 that have discouraged the investment in such vehicles and that the failure of the CEC has undermined, for example, the strategic gamble made by Renault in 1989 to allocate more than 5,000 engineers to this field. But this is not the important element. The essential point is the sense of a “trap” that captures part of the population, illustrated as the “peaks” in Figure 1, including those among the middle and higher income bracket, because it has no flexibility in its consumer choices.

A typical example here is the dependence on cars for commuting between home and work. The power to purchase vehicular mobility has increased over the last thirty years together with the intolerance towards increases in petrol prices. The paradox is that the growth of real estate prices, combined with low fuel prices, has made the population migrate to less dense suburban areas, less served by public infrastructure, where it found itself dependent on the car, including to go to work. In the 1990s, when interviews and vox pops recorded the suffering of the motorist at each price increase (without similar coverage whenever falls in prices occurred!), it constituted a disservice to households, maintaining the illusion that the rising cost of fuel was avoidable.

It is this feeling of being trapped which explains the effectiveness of anti-environmentalism, the presentation of the carbon tax as punitive and guilt-apportioning and ultimately of the rise in the media of consumer protection. But this efficiency would have been less effective if we had used, in addition to the appeal for caution vis-à-vis climate change, other arguments to support higher prices of fossil fuels. There are at least three of them:

- The most obvious concerns energy security; indeed, during this period, there has been little emphasis on reminding the French people that the tax was a bulwark against excessive dependence on the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and that it would be better to fund French schools and pensions rather than to contribute to an oil revenue that funds an 828 metre tower in Dubai and feeds the financial strength of the Gulf countries.
- The second is, as we have seen, the possibility of using carbon tax revenues to lower levies that are particularly disadvantageous for the economy. To this is added the fact that, by taxing energy, the level of charge that falls on the company follows the fluctuations of production and declines when business is not good; it would enable the reduction of the significant disincentive to employ people in the current system where, when the turnover is lower than expected, social security contributions increase per unit produced and represent a tax on excess employees because
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of labour laws. In addition, there is the fact that companies have an incentive to retain skilled and committed employees to be able to respond when orders increase again. The carbon tax could have been included in a general fiscal reform to help the competitiveness of SMEs and manufacturing industries, once having responded to the concerns of heavy industry, by giving them the choice to stay in the EU-ETS system or to be taxed but to benefit from a decrease in charges.

- Finally, one could have explained how, in the long term, a carbon tax can support policies aiming at reorienting agriculture, construction and transportation systems (without carbon tax, road freight will continue to increase its competitiveness in relation to rail or waterways), and at centralized innovation or a more balanced territorial planning. This affects our agricultural model (better use of local potential, ecological engineering in substitution for more expensive energy and chemical inputs, higher transportation costs moderating competition among territories by major distribution channels) as well as our urban model (commuting distances).

By ignoring these arguments, it was easy to stir up anti-green reflexes in certain parts of the population. A polemicist from the radio station RTL even said that the carbon tax was a stupid idea equivalent to taxing babies because of the CO₂ they

The more incomes rise, the less energy expenditure represents an important part of the household budget. But this trend includes high variability within the same income class. Energy needs depend on the place of residence, lifestyle as well as income.

FIGURE 2 Energy consumption does not only depend on income

The share of energy in the budget of 10,305 French households according to their standard of living.

Source: Emmanuel Combet, Fiscalité carbone et progrès social, Application au cas français, PhD thesis at the EHESS, 2013.
emit through respiration, and that N. Sarkozy had only wanted to please N. Hulot. We cannot blame the latter for the brilliance with which he imposed his pact, but his action has affected public opinion that was so little informed of the carbon tax that it was easy to label as a “bobo” fad, an idea that had been promoted since the 1990s by many economists and by the European Commission on behalf of the conciliation between environment, employment and competitiveness. It remains to be seen why these “oversights” were possible. This is where the case of the carbon tax has a value of generality, revealing the implicit anthropology of public space today, which fragments the person and the citizen.

First, there is the compartmentalization of issues and militancy that show the neglect of non-climatic arguments and the reluctance to advocate social negotiation. It is as if we had wanted this tax to remain purely an ecological issue, either by fear of diluting the environmental objective or, prosaically, to avoid having discussions with activists from other causes. A cultural gap remains between environmental NGOs and trade unions. It is exacerbated by the ease of access to the media of spokespersons for causes that are not subject to the discipline of trade unionists who are accountable to their constituents. These advocates hope for an easy victory through their impact on public opinion and policy. But public opinion turned when there was a move from abstract wishes to the determination of who should pay the bill.

Finally, there was the obstacle highlighted by the effectiveness of interventions “in the name of consumers”, that started in early July 2010: the mobilization of the equity argument in a public discourse marked by the primacy of the interests of consumers and this interest being reduced to the search for the lowest price above all else. It is in the name of this consumer interest that we reject rising gas and electricity prices, or we allege to protect the population against rising fuel prices. But what the consumer does not pay today is what the taxpayer or the company will pay tomorrow, and after that so will the dismissed worker and the future consumer whose bills will be duly weighted by the spillover effects between sectors.

In fact, the way in which the concern for fairness and protection of vulnerable populations was translated through the media on the basis of a consumer figure has blocked any projection into the future; this consumer looks at price without questioning the reasons for that price and what it involves in terms of sacrifice in the present (underpayment, poor working conditions) and future (under-investment, environmental costs). The future disappears in such a game, because there is no room for the discussion of the real interests of all, as here and now consumers, but also as a consumer of tomorrow, the worker, the parent or the grandparent who is concerned about the fulfilment of their children and grandchildren.

Conclusion
In the end, Sarkozy’s carbon tax was killed by the temptation for a “political coup” that, by refusing to allow time for negotiations on the use of the tax revenue, did not allow sufficient intellectual preparation to develop arguments that would speak
A major issue appears here beyond the cases we have analysed: the construction of a public space for debate which blocks the diabolical game of the fragmentation of individuals and societal issues, equity questions being of course a major dimension of these issues. Perhaps this cannot be done without what Pierre-Noël Giraud calls “a vast movement of awareness in favour of equality”. Here lies the heart of the issue, which is ethical in principle, that we should not only think of the “poor” (or any minority) when to do so is merely useful for blocking a measure that we do not want. A movement is necessary to counter these manipulations and to discuss the necessary solidarity, in an integrated collective project, so that the benefit of coming generations is not preserved at the sacrifice of the most vulnerable generations today.

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