**Blame Work and the Scapegoating Mechanism in Market Status Quo**

**Abstract**

This study explores the tenacity of the plastics market and reveals blame work to explain market status quo. Anti-plastic advocates accuse corporations and regulators of inefficient measures deployed to control the omnipresence, hazardous effects, and indestructability of plastic. Regulators focus on single-use plastic and recycling to mitigate the omnipresence of plastic and delegate responsibility to other actors for its hazardous effects and indestructability. Plastic producers and distributors avoid blame by developing alternatives to single-use plastic. Consumers locally and sporadically blame policy makers and corporations for plastic problems but lack resources and social organization to effect broad changes in the market. From all these dynamics of blame emerges a scapegoat: consumers accepting responsibility for plastic problems. Dynamics of blame help maintain boundaries of power and interest and contribute to consumer responsibilization, reinforce power imbalances, hinder collaboration among actors with different interests in plastic, and, as such, help maintain market status quo.

**Keywords:** Plastic;Scapegoat; Institutional work; Blame; Responsibility; Market status quo

**1. Introduction**

While markets, especially highly contested ones, may integrate new logics to optimize the well-being of the environment, people, and society at large (Ozdamar Ertekin et al., 2020), this change is generally slow, and at times, imperceivable. To understand the tenacity of contested markets, scholars point to oppositional groups of actors engaged in a tug of war that delays market transformation (Hardy & Maguire, 2017; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Oreskes & Conway, 2011; Orsini, 2002). Market adversaries (e.g., activists, social movements, scientists, alternative media, and experts) raise doubts about a targeted industry for its harmful impact on individuals and society. Market incumbents (e.g., producers, retailers, industry actors) deploy doubt-mongering strategies, willful ignorance, and other tactics that undermine the contestations (Oreskes & Conway, 2011).

Studies show that, over time, contestations may succeed in enforcing policy outcomes to change or eliminate undesirable markets (Aryal & Morley, 2020; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Ruff, 2017). Maguire and Hardy’s (2009) work on the disappearance of DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane), a top-selling insecticide in the mid-1950s, for example, demonstrates how increasing recognition of health risks mobilized a set of actors to categorize DDT use as dangerous and unethical leading to its ban in 1972. Likewise, asbestos, once a mineral with “magical qualities” used in the construction industry with “more than 3000 patented uses” (Gregson et al., 2010, p.1066 & 1069) and supported by politicians and strong industries (Ruff, 2017), was abandoned gradually, with 67 national bans by 2020 (Aryal & Morley, 2020). Culturally imbued consumption practices such as eating fois gras (DeSoucey, 2016) has been abandoned in French cities such as Strasbourg (Capital, 25/11/2021) and its production, importation, and distribution was banned in California early 2019 (Le Figaro, 07/01/2019) because of contestations raised by the animal rights movements. Thus, actors with the capacity to single out a market for ethical misconduct and associated health and environmental risks can succeed in demanding laws and sanctions to restrict or end undesirable markets. Yet, some markets retain their status quo despite increasing contestations.

This paper aims to uncover the mechanisms hindering the sustainable transformations in markets. Exploring the plastic market in France between 2016 and 2020, this study delineates how markets can maintain their status despite increasing contestations. In France, whilst a succession of bans was implemented on single-use plastic and policy incentives were created to increase plastic recycling, the plastic market continues to grow. Why is this the case when mainstream media have claimed “plastic pollution has become one of the most pressing environmental issues” (National Geographic, 07/06/2019) and scientists have repeatedly shown harmful effects of plastic (Sarkingobir et al., 2020)?

Drawing on institutional theory, boundary work, and the scapegoating mechanism, the study reveals dynamics of accusations, delegation, blame avoidance, and sporadic blaming performed by four groups of actors, all contributing to a market status quo. Accusations, which are mainly put forth by anti-plastic advocates concerned with plastic dangers, are directed at suppliers/distributors of plastics and plastic regulators for their lack of initiative and at consumers to restrict their consumption of plastic. Plastic regulators focus on the spatiality of plastics and delegate responsibility to plastic suppliers, distributors, and end users for increasing recycling and minimizing single-use plastic. Plastic suppliers and distributors avoid blame by successfully redefining single-use plastic ban and recycling incentives in ways of mobilizing consumers for alternative consumption choices. Consumers acknowledge the faults of other actors in creating plastic problems but end up sporadically blaming them as they lack resources and social organization to change the market. From these dynamics of accusations, delegation, blame avoidance, and sporadic blaming emerge a scapegoat—the consumer, the least powerful actor in the plastics market. As consumers cannot control the production, circulation, regulation, and socio-material imperatives to consume plastic, the scapegoating mechanism strengthens boundary demarcation between groups of actors, reinforces power imbalance, and hinders collaboration among field actors, which obstructs alternative solutions to complex plastic problems and maintains the status quo of plastics industry.

The following section sets the theoretical stage for and presents the details of this study. The findings and concluding remarks help enhance current understanding of the persistence of markets under conditions of contestations and contribute to literature on market status quo.

2. Markets as Organizational fields

Scholars are increasingly using the institutional theory lens to explore how markets transform from complex interactions among consumers, intermediaries, organizations, and the institutional environment (Slimane et al., 2019). Markets, understood as “organizational fields” (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015, p. 42), comprise of various actors and organizations that create “a common meaning system” (Scott, 2001, p. 56). Organizational fields tend to follow dominant institutional logics that specify “assumptions, beliefs, and rules that guide activities, projects, and interactions” (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015, p. 1449). Organizational fields are also subject to institutional boundaries that frame categories of actors, objects, and practices within the field and against other fields (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). For instance, in the field of fashion, scholars identify categories of actors who have established legitimacy and power in the field (e.g., clothing fashion designers, stylists, models, fashion media) and non-traditional actors who struggle to gain power in the field (e.g., fashion bloggers, street photographers, social media fashion websites) (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015).

3. Market dynamics

Organizational fields may change or end because of environmental transformations, unexpected events, or actors or institutional entrepreneurs whose collective contestations trigger the creation of new institutional arrangements (Hardy & Maguire, 2017; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Orsini, 2002). Scholars have explored the collective mobilization of actors, who they envision as agents of change or stability in a given field (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Hiatt et al., 2009). For example, Scaraboto and Fischer’s (2013) *fatshionistas* draw on the fat acceptance movement to contest the exclusion of large sizes from fashion clothing chains. Although the authors do not explicitly refer to boundaries, their analysis highlights actors engaged in disrupting field boundaries with the goal “to overthrow elites in the field of fashion” (p. 1246). Because some categories of actors benefit from power and privilege within established institutional boundaries, they might deploy boundary maintenance work when confronted with market challengers. Zietsma and Lawrence (2010), for instance, show the co-opting government and forestry firms that mutually benefit from power, status, and resource boundaries, and join efforts to maintain field boundaries against institutional challengers (environmentalist and allies).

3.1*. Disrupting field boundaries*

Field transformation requires a broad range of actors with capacity to disrupt the field boundaries (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). For instance, Hiatt et al. (2009) highlight the anti-alcohol tactics of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in “promoting behavioral norms, educating the populace, and lobbying for regulation” through parades, public gatherings, protests, and alliances with health and education authorities. These tactics help disrupt the established coordination across the actors within the field and frame the alcohol industry as “evil” (Hiatt et al., 2009, p. 660). Similarly, exploring the de-institutionalization of DDT, Maguire and Hardy (2009) demonstrate how a network of scientists, journalists, the media, politicians, and NGOs deploys rhetorical strategies to redraw the field boundaries of expertise and power by normalizing new bodies of knowledge and creating new subject positions on “using DDT and other pesticides” (Maguire and Hardy, 2009, p. 170).

*3.2. Protecting field boundaries*

In times of contestations (Hiatt et al., 2009; Maguire and Hardy, 2009), a crisis (Garud et al., 2014; Ruff, 2017), Ior new market entrants (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015), institutional actors often defend boundaries (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). For instance, established actors in the field of fashion defended their distinct status by repeatedly denigrating bloggers and street photographers (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015) while actors in the asbestos market mobilized scientific evidence for the safe use of asbestos through proper guidance and clear processes (Ruff, 2017).

Organizations accused of misconducts often defend their institutional boundaries by blaming others for misconduct (Hood, 2002; Roulet & Pichler, 2020). To “blame” means “to say or think that someone or something did something wrong or is responsible for something bad happening” (Roulet & Pichler, 2020, p. 3). For example, the Volkswagen emissions scandal in 2015 reveals powerful actors in the field blaming less powerful actors for misconduct to protect their legitimacy (Rhodes, 2016). Similarly, following a major crisis like oil spills, the media usually forges a disaster myth to divert cultural attention to designated scapegoat brands who have the power to restore their brand image, thereby “exempting the broader oil industry” (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014, p. 903) The implication of blame to protest field boundaries is that a contested market might persist (Hood, 2010). To better understand how blame can lead to market status quo, this study turns to the French Catholic anthropologist and philosopher René Girard’s scapegoating mechanism.

4. The scapegoating mechanism

According to Girard (1982), blaming is a behavioral pattern through which individuals or groups shift the blame for a devastating event to others. When actors blame each other for such events without recognizing their fault, the process usually ends with a scapegoat accepting responsibility (Girard, 1977). Clear in Girard’s (1982) scapegoating mechanism is that the scapegoating unfolds through mimesis, or imitation. As one actor or group of actors accuses another actor of being the cause of societal problems, other actors will mimetically follow, gradually leading to a consensus on a common scapegoat. The sacrifice of a scapegoat, who is usually the least protected by the group or society (Boeker, 1992; Djabi & De Longueval, 2020; Roulet & Pichler, 2020), helps perpetuate the functioning of society and maintain order (Girard, 1982).

The scapegoating mechanism has informed studies in organizational, political, and management studies (Roulet & Pichler, 2020). Scapegoating is found to unfold from actors in powerful positions protecting their field (Boeker, 1992) and the scapegoat may accept, negotiate, or reject their responsibility (Djabi & De Longueval, 2020). Less understood, however, is how a potential scapegoating mechanism works in market dynamics.

5. The study

5.1. Context

This study explores the tenacity of the plastics market. Questions about the legitimacy of this market can be traced back to the 1960s, when plastic particles were first identified in marine systems and later detected in sea life (Rothstein, 1973). Anti-plastic advocates (e.g., No Plastic in My Sea, Plastic Attack France) have sounded the alarm on the dangers plastic brings to health, the natural ecosystem, and society at large. Local problem-solving initiatives (e.g., beach cleaning programs, plastic free July) and national politics (e.g., bans on targeted single-use plastic, deposit return programs) demonstrate growing concerns about the social and environmental harms plastic causes. Large corporations have committed to decreasing their plastic packaging by 2025 (e.g., “National Pact on Plastic Packaging 2025”), and plastic prevention business models, such as zero waste shops, bulk distribution, and repair cafés, are (re) emerging. Consumer movements such as zero waste homes (Johnson, 2013), simple living (Tosun & Sezgin, 2021), minimalist lifestyles (*MamaMinimalist*, 03/08/2020), the Buy Nothing project (Clark & Rockefeller, 2020), and slow food (*SlowFood*, 29/06/2021) are also promoting tactics to decrease plastic consumption in everyday life.

These diverse actors and their engagement in the field generated wide media attention (ActuEnvironnement, 17/07/2018, 11/04/2019, 17/04/2019; Commetric, 12/12/2019). The media heralded a “plastic revolution” (Aljazeera, 18/06/2018; Arté, 22/08/2018) and a “war on plastic” (Arté, 22/08/2018; Capital, 12/08/2018, 23/09/2019; Charentelibre, 11/07/2019; France Info, 28/08/2018; France Inter, 05/06/2019; The Connexion, 29/08/2019). Table 1 presents a chronology of major events triggering media discussions on plastic in France between January 2016 and January 2020.

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Despite mounting contestations and responses from multiple actors, changes in the plastics market remain slow and often imperceptible. Currently, plastic production is projected to continue growing (Leal Filho et al., 2019). In France, for example, the plastics industry generated €30.2 million in 2017, €31.7 in 2018, and €32.0 in 2019, and France was Europe’s third-largest plastic producer in 2018 (Statista, 20/08/2019).

5.2. Data

Data was collected between 2016 and 2020 using diverse sources, including articles, web news, blogs, media reports, books, and interviews (Table 2). Media content and articles came from Factiva and Lexis-Nexis covering the data period, with the keywords “plastique” (plastic), “plastique à usage unique” (single-use plastic), “déchet plastique” (plastic waste), and “France.” Searches around “plastique attaque” (attack plastic), “contre le plastique” (against plastic), “plastique ennemie” (plastic enemy), and “guerre au plastique” (war on plastic) also helped capture content that might have been overlooked. Data selection began by scanning the title of documents to choose those indicating countervailing discourses around plastic and institutional actions and implementation in media outlets, which led to 96 documents. Additional material came from online searches from 10 major anti-plastic websites and forums. This search yielded 27 articles, three videos, 83 pieces of web news, and 336 pages of forum messages and comments. Data also included six books written on plastic, field notes from attending a conference on plastic, 29 reports, 42 articles, and 39 videos from major organizations concerned about plastic, as well as 38 newsletters from four major NGOs.

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Document data was supplemented with semi-structured interviews. Interviews with an eminent plastic scientist, one beach cleanup day organizer, and four zero waste workshop organizers helped clarify the formation and articulation of concerns about plastic and the various perspectives surrounding market change. Eleven in-depth interviews with consumers and households helped unpack their emerging reflections on plastic and if/how they engage in practices of plastic avoidance. Participants were selected from social networking, first author’s attendance in zero waste family experiments, and snowball sampling. The interviews averaged 90 minutes each and were conducted mainly in 2019 (two consumer interviews were conducted in 2017). Interviews were recorded with a voice recorder while walking in the forest, collecting plastic on a beach, sitting in a quiet environment, or visiting participants’ homes, locations chosen by informants and facilitating their willingness to share.

5.3. Data analysis

Data was captured via NVivo 12. Data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) in three stages. The first stage involved sorting the data to reveal categories of actors as demarcated by institutional boundaries (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). Drawing on institutional theory, plastic market was treated as a constellation of plastic producers and distributors with “power and interests” (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010, p. 202) distinct from other actors, such as plastic regulators, consumers, and anti-plastic advocates – all struggling for “a common meaning system” (Scott, 2001, p. 56) against increasing plastic problems juxtaposed with a global reliance on plastic trade. A mechanism of blame was visible among four categories of actors: (1) plastic producers, distributors, and recyclers; (2) plastic regulators (including policy actors, municipalities, and city governance–NGO alliances); (3) consumers; and (4) anti-plastic advocates (including activists, NGOs, alternative media, scientists, and environmental organizations). The second stage involved identifying and categorizing actions undertaken by these groups, including diffusing discourses against the use of plastic, creating legislation, changing plastic distribution, and influencing plastic consumption habits. Following a constant iterative process (Charmaz, 2006), the third stage involved coding the data within and across categories, leading to themes presented next.

6. Plastic problems, dynamics of blame, and the scapegoat

The data reveals that plastic has been demonized as a “monster” threatening human and animal health, the natural environment, and the well-being of society (Positivr, 07/05/2019; #plastiquenonmerci; leplastiquetue.com). The problematization of plastic circulates widely through anti-plastic websites, interest groups, NGOs, web news, and the media. Within the contested field of plastic, dynamics of blame unfolds as groups of actors select specific plastic problems to work on and try to shift responsibility for other, often broader problems to actors outside their group. Such dynamics of blame, almost organically, unfolds a scapegoating mechanism through which consumers end up accepting responsibility. The dynamics of blame consist of accusations, delegation, blame avoidance, and sporadic blaming (see Fig. 1).

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6.1. Defining problems in the field of plastic

Three sets of vocabulary and metaphors–plastic as hazardous material, plastic as uncontainable matter, and plastic as indestructible waste–problematize the materiality, spatiality, and temporality of plastic as threatening to human and animal health, the natural environment, and society’s well-being (Table 3).

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*Plastic* *as hazardous material* highlights the materiality of plastic threatening human and animal health (LeDevoir, 17/08/2017; National Geographic, 05/06/2018; Zero Waste France, 27/03/2019). Anti-plastic websites such as “plastic kills” (<http://leplastiquetue.com/>) and books using metaphors such as "toxic cocktail," "time bomb," and “genocide” categorize plastic as a destructive force that endangers human health, the land, and marine ecosystems. Scientists and plastic experts also discuss the hazards caused by plastic at conferences, in books, and in articles. For example, Jérome Santolini, researcher at the Université Paris-Saclay, stresses the dangers of plastic in French cafeterias, including the use of plastic cooking bags, disposable plastic trays, and plastic dishes (The Conversation, 05/09/2018). Books such as *Pas de Plastique dans nos Assiettes* (No Plastic in Our Plates, 2018), [Zéro Plastique Zéro Toxique](https://www.thierrysouccar.com/sante/livre/zero-plastique-zero-toxique-4160) (Zero Plastic Zero Toxic, 2017), and Survivre au Péril Plastique (Surviving Plastic Hazard, 2019) also highlight the harmful effects of plastic on people. The media also covers widely the problematization of plastic as hazardous material, detailing the plastic-related deaths of wild marine life, including the death of a whale found in Scotland in December 2019 (198 French web news items) and of a baby dugong named Mariam found in Thailand in August 2019 (82 French web news items).

Plastic as uncontainable matter draws attention to the spatiality of plastic, which can become “matter out of place” and create disorder and pollution (Douglas, 1966). The spatial problematization of plastic is evidenced in media reports, websites, and blogs portraying horrific visuals of plastic packaging, plastic toys, and other plastics lingering in rivers and oceans (see Fig. 2).

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Plastic as uncontainable matter draws attention to the failure of the French waste management to contain waste which is, instead, exported to China or other Asian countries for incineration or landfilling (Ecoconso, 25/01/2018; Journal de l’Environnement, 02/07/2017). Although plastic regulators try to contain plastic by increasing recycling, the problematization of plastic as indestructible shows limits to this solution.

Plastic as indestructible waste highlights the atemporality of plastic. When consumed, plastic does not fade away but remains unmanaged and impossible to eliminate. Patrick Navard, a plastic scientist from Centre de Mise en Forme des Matériaux, explains how toxic plastic substances at sea do not disappear but instead accumulate throughout the food chain (field notes, Patrick Navard Conference, 2018). Indestructibility of plastic emphasizes the inadequacies of recycling to deal with high volumes of plastic waste (e.g., No Plastic in My Sea; Bastaplastic.org). Flore Berlingen (2020), director of Zero Waste France, an independent grassroots NGO, explains how the recycling industry encourages the production of plastic and her allegation echoes media reports explaining that “designing plastic objects by multiplying layers of different resins makes it impossible to recycle them” and “a considerable amount of plastic is not made to be recycled” (France Inter, 27/03/2019).

The three problematization rhetorics for plastic are widespread and difficult to ignore. However, these problematizations are juxtaposed and the multiplicity of interpretations makes coordination among actors to mitigate problems associated with the materiality, spatiality, and temporality of plastic difficult. Field actors maintain their power and interests by focusing on specific plastic problematizations rather than providing alternative solutions that can displace plastic in the marketplace. As a result, dynamics of blame unfolds.

6.2. Dynamics of blame

In the field of plastic where groups of actors with different levels of power and interests are confronted with various plastic problems, dynamics of blame unfold as accusations, delegation, blame avoidance, and sporadic blaming.

6.2.1. Accusations for complex plastic problems

Anti-plastic advocates, including activist groups, environmental NGOs, scientists, and alternative media, highlight the complexity and multiplicity of plastic problems (e.g., No Plastic in My Sea: Bastaplastic.org; plastic kills: leplastiquetue.com, plastic is everywhere: #plastiquenonmerci). Attacking plastic as materially, spatially, and temporally problematic, advocates accuse corporations and governments of inactions or insufficient actions and try to mobilize consumers for market changes.

In March 2019, a young student echoed the alerts issued by Zero Waste France against McDonald’s overuse of plastic (Zero Waste France, 23/04/2017; 16/06/2017; 18/10/2018) and launched a petition “Zero Waste McDo!” which gathered more than 115,000 signatures within a two-month period (BFM, 15/03/2019). Boycott Citoyen, a citizen boycott organization, and Attaque Contre le Plastique (plastic attack) accused Nestlé and large retailers for plastic problems. On June 1, 2018, Plastic Attack France organized plastic packaging collection event in 100 retailers to raise awareness for the predominance of plastic packaging in food retail (RTBF, 01/06/2018).

Accusations include debates on the trustworthiness, credibility, and power of government institutions to control plastic problems. On Plastiquetue (plastic kills) web page, it writes: “Plastic recycling does not work and is not a sustainable solution. It is an illusion that gives us a good conscience and takes us away from the real solutions” ([leplastiquetue.com/el-espejismo-del-reciclaje](https://leplastiquetue.com/el-espejismo-del-reciclaje/)). Zero Waste France (07/06/2019) has also accused political actors of discounting plastic waste issues when developing the anti-waste law. WWF France (World Wide Fund for Nature) decries the faulty plastic management system, where the cost of plastic pollution is not supported by actors benefiting from its production and use (WWF, 05/03/2019).

Raising issues of a faulty governance system, political alliances with industry, pitfalls of recycling policies, and unsustainable global waste flow, anti-plastic advocates call for consumers to initiate market changes. In 2017, Zero Waste France collaborated with the governmental syndicate Univalom to design zero waste family experiments to help consumers reduce single-use plastic consumption. Similarly, WWF published articles discussing plastic problems and launched campaigns (e.g., #ToutADejaEteDit) and projects (e.g., “IProtestNature”) to combat plastic pollution ([www.wwf.fr](http://www.wwf.fr)). Alternative media reinforces the call of consumer actions:

If France decides to miss its ecological transition, let us take action… down with plastic earbuds, hello [to] the reusable Japanese bamboo earpick; Goodbye plastic cups at work, let's bring our mug.… "Life in plastic, not fantastic"! (Info Durable, 08/02/2019)

Take your glass bottle…to the cashier and say, "Pour the contents into my container, because I don’t want your plastic and give me a rebate for your plastic” (AFDMS, 31/07/2019)

In appointing consumers as moral agents to act in a war against plastic, anti-plastic advocates try to facilitate development of alternative markets:

We are failing to close the plastic loop for two reasons: the recycling industry is unprofitable and failing to grow, and consumers have a limited choice of sustainable alternatives to plastic. (WWF, 01/07/2019)

Highlighting lack of alternative consumption choices, WWF points to the solution of plastic issues in consumer “capabilization” (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) where powerful actors should provide material support and guidance to enable responsible consumer choices. Instead of tackling the mass production of plastic, the focus shifts to the freedom of choice of citizen-consumers.

6.2.2. Regulation of the spatiality of plastic and delegation of material and temporal problems

Plastic regulators tend to focus on the problems associated with the spatiality of plastic (Gouvernement.fr, 21/02/2019). In 2018 and 2019, France was at the epicenter of attention for recycling plastic considerably less than other European countries (Lci 19/11/2019; LesEchos, 11/01/2018). In response, French government declared its goal to completely recycle its plastic packaging waste by 2025 (Loi anti-gaspillage 2020) and issued laws to build recycling facilities, extend the “extended producer responsibility” to toys and disposable nappies, penalize illegal plastic waste dumping and manufacturers that do not use recycled plastic in packaging, launch a system of returnable plastic bottles, and create a repairability index (Ademe, 2019; France Bleu, 10/07/2019; Gouvernement.fr, 13/12/2019 & 31/01/2020; Lci, 19/11/2019; PublicSenat, 12/08/2018). In parallel, the government issued an anti-waste bill and initiated a plan to ban all single-use plastic by 2040 (see Fig. 3; LOI n° 2020-105; anti-waste bill; Economie Gouv, 09/08/2019) by gradually decreasing the use of plastic bags at grocery stores and retail outlets, plastic bottles in public schools (Law, 2018-938), and disposable plastic plates, takeaway cups, straws, and cotton swabs (Law EGA, L541-10-5 III; Décret, 2019-1451). Recycling incentives and bans on single-use plastic respond to the spatiality of plastic as visible litter in public spaces and the unified argument against the omnipresence and excessiveness of plastic packaging (e.g., Cafedeclic, 2020; Mr Mondialisation, 04/01/2019; Natura-Sciences, 11/01/2019; #EmballageRidicule; #RidiculousPackaging).

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By focusing on the spatiality of plastic, political actors neglect broader issues associated with the materiality or temporality of plastic and fail to provoke drastic changes in the field.

The focus on single-use plastic overshadows other types of plastics that are used longer and gradually degrade, with the potential to harm the well-being of society. For example, reusable plastic containers are hazardous when exposed to high temperature (Halden, 2010; The Conversation, 05/09/2018; The Guardian, 18/02/2020), but the government does not regulate their production and consumption. The invisible but hazardous microplastic is released over time from tires, clothes, and other plastic items through friction and weathering. Scientists have recently discussed micro to nano-sized plastic as an emerging class of air pollutants affecting human health comparable to asbestos fiber (Amato-Lourenço et al., 2020).

Ban on single-use plastic items reduces large plastic problems to a few selected items that predominantly affect consumers rather than powerful industries such as health care, agriculture, construction, or transport in which plastic remains as “efficient materials that allow society to have access to clean water and effective sewage systems, safe food, energy efficient homes, green transport, global connectivity, renewable energies or affordable and hygienic healthcare” (Plastics Europe 2020, p. 7). For the automotive sector (with 8.3% of European plastic demand in 2016), for example, “plastic is now contributing to a number of exciting innovations in this field, including key components for electric, hybrid and hydrogen powered vehicles” (Plastics Europe, 2018, p. 1).

Under current plastic regulations, consumers are expected to change their plastic waste practices and gain knowledge to make informed consumption choices (Le Monde, 12/11/2019). The creation of the “convention citoyenne” (citizen’s convention) in 2019 (conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr) is another example of the ideological recruitment of consumers to minimize or solve plastic problems.

Thus, the call for “everyone to act or participate” by political actors, such as Jean Michel Lambertto’s call to combat plastic (Actu Environnment, 17/07/2018), does not reflect the imbalance of power within society. Corporations, for example, have the financial and technical resources consumers do not have. Their power allows for “problem-solving discourses” to infiltrate households and “formulate a moralistic mandate” for responsible consumption (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014, p. 842) to the benefit of corporations.

6.2.3. Providing alternatives to single-use plastic and blame avoidance

Plastic producers and distributors provide alternatives to single-use plastic items and packaging, which detracts attention from much-needed momentum to address broader plastic issues, such as hazardous plastic materiality, inefficient recycling processes, and plastic dependency (e.g., Nielsen et al., 2020). Carrefour, Auchan Retail France, Biscuits Bouvard, Coca-Cola European Partners, Danone, L'Oréal, LSDH, Nestlé France, U-System, Unilever, and the Tara Foundation all signed the "National Pact on Plastic Packaging for 2025" to decrease their plastic packaging (Carrefour, 04/11/2019; LesEchos, 12/06/2019). Many start-ups, companies, and retailers provide alternatives to plastic, such as straws made from bamboo, paper, candy, or corn (LilleActu, 24/08/2019), and some stores have introduced diverse products and liquids in bulk (Arté, 22/08/2018). Nestlé promised to eliminate all plastic straws from its products by 2025 (Capital, 15/01/2019; FastCompany, 23/01/2019). Carrefour recently publicized that it “reduces plastic by 703 tons per year by stopping the sale of plastic bags at checkouts” (newsroom.carrrefour.eu, 20/10/2020) and offers in replacement four different types of bags (“bio bags,” “ocean bags,” recycled plastic bags, and Trolley bags) to appeal to different audiences.

Such engagements are widely publicized in mainstream media and on corporate websites. For instance, Michel-Edouard Leclerc, head of a large French retailer, is portrayed as “the first, 20 years ago, to want to end single-use plastic bags in supermarkets” (Huffington Post, 08/12/2018). In claiming goodwill via highly visible actions for single-use plastics and plastic packaging, plastic producers and distributors attract and cultivate new segments of responsible consumers while maintaining low-tax burdens and economic gains. Carrefour, for example, has introduced additional retail spaces for “vrac” (food sold in bulk), which are designed to attract a new segment of consumer concerned with zero waste and plastic packaging rather than to replace packaged food.

The emergence of alternative offerings may however have unintended consequences such as extension of plastic offerings. As observation notes explain, “Gifi sells bags of 50 reusable plastic straws for €1.60. The straws are made with thick transparent plastic, all packaged in a see-through plastic bag. No instruction on use or maintenance, not labeled as dishwasher safe, no cleaning brush included” (Gifi store, July 2021). Reusable plastic straws are seldom washed and reused by consumers and tend to require considerable resources, including water and energy consumption associated with washing (Fetner & Miller, 2021).

In addition, plastic is associated with the democratization of markets. In reports highlighting a European push to harmonize bans on single-use plastic, concerns were raised about social inequalities, inaccessibility to plastic alternatives for vulnerable and underprivileged consumers, and the lack of suitable alternatives to accommodate the needs of consumers with medical needs or disabilities (The European Parliament, 13/07/2021; The Guardian, 22/05/2019; Jenks & Obringer, 2020). In effect, single-use plastic alternatives are often more expensive, less convenient, and not widely accessible. For example, Ser en Eau, a regional water company, promotes its water filtration system with the slogan “Free yourself from plastic” (BioCoop, 08/06/2019). This system is expensive and inaccessible to many consumers as an informant Léa (F, 36) explained. Likewise, products like “Ecozio leak proof stainless steel metal bento box” are sold for €85, which excludes some consumers while allowing businesses to incorporate zero waste discourses and expand their market segments for profits.

Corporations also put the onus on consumers to act as moral agents and help their companies to recycle their plastic while sidestepping their responsibility to reduce plastic production and distribution. Coca-Cola France ([www.cocacola.be/fr/helpusrecycle/)](http://www.cocacola.be/fr/helpusrecycle/)m), for example, invites consumers to “help us recycle,” albeit maintaining its use of plastic cups as promotional materials (fig. 4). Carrefour launched a participatory consultation and asked consumers to propose solutions, vote, and give their opinions on how to reduce plastic packaging:

Let's reduce plastic pollution. Get involved in writing our 2020 action plan to reduce plastic in-store! Reducing our plastic footprint is one of the major challenges facing our society. Eradicating plastic waste is a major task that requires a collective response. That's why we've decided to consult with you and imagine with you the solutions of tomorrow. (https://mission-zero-plastique.carrefour.com/)

Large plastic distributors like Carrefour show willingness to act as moral actors to fight the spatiality of plastic problems, but they remain distant from the “extended producer responsibility,” which holds producers responsible for the end-of-life cycle products they put in markets by setting up individual or shared collection points (Leal Filho et al., 2019). Currently, there is no initiative on the part of plastic distributors to enact this responsibility for their plastic packaging.

On June 11, 2019, water provider Sogedo’s web page promoted that “Drinking tap water helps fight the plastic continent.” While such campaigns help Sogedo’s image and put the onus on consumers to make responsible choices, the video featured a person drinking water from a disposable plastic bottle (Sogedo.fr). Such examples hint that French corporations’ selective engagement to “fight the plastic continent” is more motivated by alleviating tax burdens, maintaining profit, expanding their market via alternative solutions, and circumventing blame or liability for broader plastic problems than contributing to radical transformations in the field.

6.2.4. Sporadic blaming and the acceptance of responsibility for plastic problems

Efforts to minimize plastic problems by anti-plastic advocates (e.g., books on how to reduce plastic consumption, zero waste family experiments), plastic regulators (e.g., reparability index, recycling rules and infrastructure), and plastic producers and distributors (e.g., alternatives to single-use plastic items, recycling campaigns) emphasize consumers’ responsibility to change the plastic field through consumption. Consumers, while accepting their role to avoid plastic, encounter difficulties in enacting such responsibility and sporadically blame other actors for this.

Consumers blame plastic regulators, producers, and distributors for lack of alternative options to plastic: “I wanted to eat some strawberries, but I could only buy them in plastic trays…The government should mandate plastic in supermarkets, the politics are not doing anything” (Carol, F, 28). Yet, they also feel responsible and guilty for contributing to plastic problems. Lea (F, 36) feels culpable for purchasing face creams in plastic packaging as there are no acne creams in non-plastic packaging and for purchasing bottled water due to her inaccessibility to water purification systems. Valeria (F, 38) is frustrated that she cannot commit to zero waste while caring for her son:

I try to avoid plastic, but for plastic bottles, it’s tricky because my son, with his allergies, he needs to drink mineral water. I saw activated charcoal… filters the water. I found some in the region... It comes in a cartridge, and it has plastic packaging, but it's a compromise so I get good water, and it is better than sending 60 bottles a month to the dump.

Other instances of sporadic blaming occurred when consumers felt overwhelmed with the presence of plastic around them:

The more you fight against plastic and the more you try to get rid of it, the more you understand how stuck you are. Plastic is just everywhere, in our shoes, in our underwear, in our cars, it is just everywhere. So, the more you fight, the more you realize you cannot get rid of it. (Theresa, F, 53)

Theresa, like other informants, is confronted with a system built on plastic, a convenient, malleable, and cheap material for production and consumption: “pre-packaged tea bags individually wrapped in plastic, then placed in a box and wrapped in plastic again is much cheaper than loose tea” (Sarah, F, 52).

Informants also sporadically blamed retailers for not adequately transforming their business models. For example, bulk distribution was often considered dirty, disorganized, and unhygienic during zero waste family experiments: “I purchased some cereals in bulk, but the cereals were old and moldy. I don’t trust what is sold in bulk in this store.” Inflexibility to incorporate consumers’ solutions for plastic use also leads to sporadic blaming. Emily (F, 38) had to develop various tactics to reduce her plastic consumption in retailers:

In the supermarkets, you need to use a plastic bag to weigh your fruit and vegetables… I always bring a small plastic bag, I weigh the vegetables and put the price stickers on my hand and…show the stickers to the cashier but there are some cashiers who don’t like it… Some cashiers won’t scan the stickers if they are not on a plastic bag. I go where I know the cashier and don’t need to get extra bags.

Consumers lack the capacity to assemble and organize collective actions, and their blaming remains mainly individual, local, and sporadic. Consumers become scapegoats as they internalize their responsibility to the point of blaming other consumers for acting irresponsibly. Consider how Sarah (F, 52) acknowledges governmental failure and producer power for plastic problems while still blaming consumers: “I see people who don’t recycle their plastic, they put it in the wrong bins or on the floor, it’s totally irresponsible.”

7. Contributions and conclusion

Exploring the tenacity of the plastic market, which has been contested for its recalcitrant effects on public health and ecology (Trimble & Hutchinson, 2017), this study makes important contributions to the literature on market status quo.

Literature shows that markets may transform due to dynamics of contestations and defense work when, over time, contestations succeed in creating policy outcomes that enforce the abandonment of or changes in an organizational field (Aryal & Morley, 2020; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Ruff, 2017). These studies focus on organizational fields with few dominant actors that challengers can identify as common enemies (e.g., construction (asbestos) or agriculture (DDT)). By contrast, the field of plastic comprises of multiple actors with distinct power and interests, making delineations of responsibility extremely diffused. The problematization of plastic becomes broad and complex, raising different, but equally plausible accounts for each actor. Moreover, plastic is embedded in consumers’ everyday life as it infiltrates almost every industry, including the automotive, pharmaceuticals, electronics, food and beverage, fashion, and construction, and is fully integrated in infrastructures (e.g., electricity cables) and production and supply chains. Plastic waste supports a powerful recycling industry, interlocking transportation and recycling actors, companies, and local municipalities in a dependence on plastic waste flow.

The three problematizations of plastic highlighted in this study allow groups of actors to select accounts of plastic problems that align with their distinct power and interests. New plastic regulations redefine plastic problems as issues of single-use plastic and recycling, which shifts responsibility to consumers for recycling and choosing alternatives of single-use plastic items. However, relying on recycling could be a “costly and time intensive” (Garcia & Robertson, 2017, p. 870) “illusion” ([leplastiquetue.com/el-espejismo-del-reciclaje](https://leplastiquetue.com/el-espejismo-del-reciclaje/); Berlingen, 2020; France Inter, 27/03/2019), stimulating “a system based on disposable and single-use products” (Zero Waste France 10/27/2020). Alternatives to single-use plastic items create a vicious cycle by fueling the production of new forms of plastic. For example, bulk distribution requires plastic containers that may be indestructible and unrecyclable (Garcia & Robertson, 2017). A focus on single-use plastic can also become conflicting for consumers in different contexts. For example, COVID-19 pandemic and tap water pollution, to some extent, temporarily reinstall the legitimacy of plastic (e.g., plastic gloves, disposable masks, bottled water) as a moral choice to protect self and social wellbeing. Overall, as plastic exists at the junction of commercial interests and consumption needs, contesting its production, distribution, and consumption unfolds the power imbalance at play in markets.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of resources, social organizing, connected consumers, and collective actions to facilitate market transformation (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Hiatt et al., 2009; Maguire & Hardy, 2009) and integrate a logic of sustainability in markets (Ozdamar Ertekin et al., 2020). The scapegoating mechanism explored in this study reveals the scapegoat consumers not only accepting responsibility but also succumbing to the exercise of power in society (Foucault, 1975; Shankar et al., 2006). In contrast with fields in which consumers can socially organize to boycott targeted products or brands and maintain their everyday lives, boycotting plastic is near to impossible. Field boundaries and power imbalance are thus important to market status quo.

Unlike oil spills (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014), product-harm crises (Gao et al., 2012), or the Rana Plaza tragedy in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2017; Ozdamar Ertekin et al., 2020), plastic problems are persistent and do not automatically trigger crisis management, making it difficult to identify few large corporations as temporary scapegoats. For plastic field, the scapegoating mechanism becomes normalized and further delays crucial transformations in the market by obscuring market failures and thwarting actions to correct malpractice for which all market actors are responsible.

There are some implications for policy makers and businesses in the plastic market. Acknowledging that groups of powerful actors bound, define, and impose a focal problematization in targeted market is a start. Regulators’ “official” definition of market problems (e.g., single-use plastic and low recycling rate) can be translated by powerful corporations for their own benefits. To counter these power dynamics hindering market transformation, we suggest including anti-market advocates and consumers’ perspectives when coding market problems and making political decisions. This can be done by designing a boundary-crossing community linking local context to market problematizations. The problematization of markets should thus be a process upon which solutions are presented and adopted when political and managerial considerations coincide with the perspectives and needs articulated by eclectic consumers with different resources and needs.

Second, acknowledging the increasing market unpredictability and need for flexibility in businesses to remain competitive (Dreyer & Grønhaug, 2004), this study suggests corporations and retailers to be flexible in their responses to regulations. Whilst developing alternative to single-use plastic could be an adequate response, businesses need to remain flexible and resort to other forms of production or de-production of plastic to (re)shape the field.

Finally, understanding that blaming is at play in the maintenance of power and interest boundaries within a market can inform social movements and consumer activists. Studies showed that activists use shame campaigns, demonization of corporate evils, and blame attribution to contest a market (Bloomfield, 2014; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) and blame distinct enemies with the hope of mobilizing actors (Orsini, 2002). By highlighting that blaming draws on boundaries and power networks in a field and showing the unintended consequences of dynamics of blame on consumers, the current study suggests activists to recognize and navigate these power networks and form collaborations with international institutions to facilitate market transformation.

Future research could explore power imbalance and dynamics of blame at play in market status quo in domains other than plastic. For example, how/if blaming could unfold in sustainable fashion to interlock a logic of art, a logic of commerce, and a logic of sustainability in the field (Ozdamar Ertekin et al., 2020). Changes in fields such as fashion may result from a consensus on one dominant problem (e.g., short product life cycle leading to landfilling). Such consensus may be difficult to achieve in other fields. Future research might explore whether/how groups of actors with different problematization and resources can collectively organize and build consensus around a dominant problem to tackle and create long-lasting changes in a designated field.

Research could apply a blame and scapegoating perspective to explore consumer responsibilization (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) and if/how acceptance of responsibility helps maintain the status of market actors or to examine sustainability, fair trade, and ethical trade to reveal market actors’ malpractices that are otherwise less visible. Finally, this study focuses on consumers as end users of plastic. Future research could investigate other end users such as offices, schools, and other institutions to explore how scapegoating works for these actors.

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**Table 1**

Chronological summary.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Date | Events |
| July 2016  Jan. 1, 2017  2017  July 2017  Jan. 2018  April 2018  Aug. 2018  Aug. 2018  2018  Aug. 28,2018  2018  Dec. 2018  March 9, 2019  March 16, 2019  June–Aug. 2019  Aug. 20-25, 2019  Aug. 23, 2019  Aug.–Sept. 2019  Sept. 2019  Sept. 28, 2019  Jan. 1, 2020 | Ban on plastic bags with a capacity of 10 liters or less and a thickness of less than 50 microns with handles  Ban on all plastic bags in grocery and retail outlets  China imposes restrictions on plastic imports  Regulation mandates the replacement of packaged fruit, vegetables, and meat in supermarkets with domestically compostable packaging produced from bio-sourced materials  Negative press on French recycling: “France is behind European countries in terms of its recycling rate.”  President Macron announces objective of 100% recycled plastic in 2025  Heat wave in Europe  President Macron declares the urgency to increase plastic recycling  Development of bonus-malus to be implemented in 2019  French environment minister, Nicolas Hulot, resigns  Gilets Jaunes (yellow vests) mobilization and roadblocks  “l’affaire du siècle” = climate change legal action against the French government before the Administrative Court of Paris in May 2019  Climate protesters strip French town halls of Macron’s portrait – “we are coming to get you!”  French rally for climate change mitigation: yellow vests join with green vests: “one protest march for all”  Negative press on President Macron on his lack of environmental engagement (e.g., criticism of Tour de France, plastic consumption/gifts)  Macron’s call for G7 talks on Amazon fires  Macron’s speech “I have changed,” although French public doubts Macron’s ecological engagement.  Heat wave in Europe: French public doubts Macron’s ecological engagement  President Macron announces a war on single-use plastic  Loi “antigaspillage pour une économie circulaire” - anti-waste law adopted by the Senat 30/01/2020  Ban on disposable plastic plates, takeaway cups, straws, and cotton buds |

**Table 2**

Data sources.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Types of data | Sources |  |
| Anti-plastic websites | leplastiquetue.com  unoceandeplastique.fr  noplasticinmysea.org  boycottcitoyen.org  plasticattackfrance - Facebook  Partage Plastic Attack Méditerranée – Zero Déchet  Echos Verts Blog Vivre sans plastique  Gilets Verts Facebook - Plastique  Bastaplastic.org - Facebook  [Je suis le Climat](https://www.facebook.com/jesuisleclimat/) Facebook - plastique | 5 articles  12 articles/3 videos  5 articles/59 webnews  5 articles/23 web news  69 pages  51 pages  64 pages  21 pages  79 pages  52 pages |
| Media articles | National media (e.g., *La croix, La tribune, Le Figaro, Capital, Le Monde, LesEchos, L’Humanité, Liberation, and Courrier International*)  Local media (e.g., *Le Parisien, Charentlibre, Nice Matin, NordLittoral, LillActu, L’Est Républicain*)  Specialized/alternative media (e.g., *research in technology and innovation: CEA; Consumption: Ecoconso, Toitsalternatifs, Journal de L’Environnement, Consoglobe*)  Web news (e.g., *Adverenvironment, Positivr, Aljazeera, The Conversation, Rfi, France Inter, Lci, Rfi, France Fnfo, France Bleu, Arté, Basta*). | 11 articles  23 articles  28 articles  34 articles |
| Books | Will McCallum (2019), *En finir avec le Plastique*  Association Cantine sans plastice (2018), *Pas de Plastique dans nos Assiettes, des perturbateurs endoctriniens à la cantine.*  Matthieu Combe (2019), *Survivre au Péril Plastique – des solutions à tous les niveaux.*  Aline Gubri & Benedicte Moret (2017), *Zéro Plastique, Zéro Toxique*  Pauline Imbault (2018), *Zero Plastique, On s’y met*  Sophie Noucher & Claire Morel Fatio (2019), *Le Plastique C’est Pas Automatique* | 6 books |
| Reports, articles, and videos published by organizations involved with plastic | Ademe  Univalom  Zero Waste France  Le Fonds Mondial pour la Nature France (WWF)  Greenpeace France  Plastics Europe  Expédition Méditerranée | 12 reports/5 articles  5 reports  37 articles  5 articles  4 articles  9 reports  39 videos/reports |
| Newsletters | Université des Colibris - Mouvement Colibris  Zero Waste France  WWF France  No Plastic in My Sea | 15 newsletters  14 newsletters  7 newsletters  2 newsletters |
| Conferences | « Des plastiques et des hommes : peut-on se passer des matières plastiques ? » (plastic and humans: can we live without plastic?) 25/04/2018, Biot – Patrick Navard | 6 pages – field notes |
| 6 semi-structured interviews | 1 interview with plastic scientist (École des Mines Paris (George, M, 68).  1 interview with beach cleanup day organizer (Lucie, F, 21)  Interviews with 4 zero waste workshop organizers (Celine, F, 26; Marie, F, 32; Maelle, F, 22; Karine, F, 42) | 26 pages  9 pages  41 pages |
| 11 In-depth interviews | Interviews with 2 consumers enrolled in zero waste family experiment to discuss plastic practices (Valeria, F, 38 & Theresa, F, 53)  Interviews with 5 consumers concerned about plastic waste (Carol, F, 28; John, M, 52; Jean, F, 32; Emily, F, 38; Sarah, F, 52)  Interviews with 4 families enrolled in zero waste family experiment (Lorraine & Marc, 2 children; Lea & Paul, 1 child; Robert, 2 children; Veronique & Pierre, 2 children). | 179 pages |

**Table 3**

Defining plastic as problem.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Problematization rhetoric** | **Plastic elements** | **Plastic problems & market failure** | **Metaphors** | **Illustrations** |
| *Plastic as hazardous material* | Materiality | The materiality of plastic and the market failure to control plastic-related health problems | "Toxic cocktail"  “Genocide” | Daily exposition to plastic represents a major risk to health. (leplastiquetue.com)  Plastic kills marine wildlife. (unoceandeplastique.fr) |
| *Plastic as unmanageable matter* | Spatiality | The spatiality of plastic and the market failure to safely move plastic and maintain plastic in designated spaces | “Earth is a plastic planet”  “We are drowning in plastic”  “A sea of plastics!” | Plastic is everywhere nowadays. In the home, outside or in our workplace, plastic is ubiquitous. (anti-plastic blog) |
| *Plastic as indestructible waste* | Temporality | The temporality of plastic and the market failure to recycle / eliminate plastic waste | “Time bomb”  “Catastrophe” “Ecological crisis”  “Plastic environmental disaster” | Plastic fragments are present in almost all ecosystems. (leplastiquetue.com/)  Once in the wild, plastic takes hundreds of years to decompose, more than a century for some of them. (leplastiquetue.com/) |

**Fig. 1.** Scapegoating in market dynamics.

**PLASTIC PROBLEMS**

**(**hazardous material, indestructible waste, uncontained matter)

Plastic producers & Distributors

BLAME-AVOIDANCE

Plastic Regulators

DELEGATION

Anti-plastic Advocates

ACCUSATIONS

Consumers

SPORADIC BLAMING

&

THE SCAPEGOAT



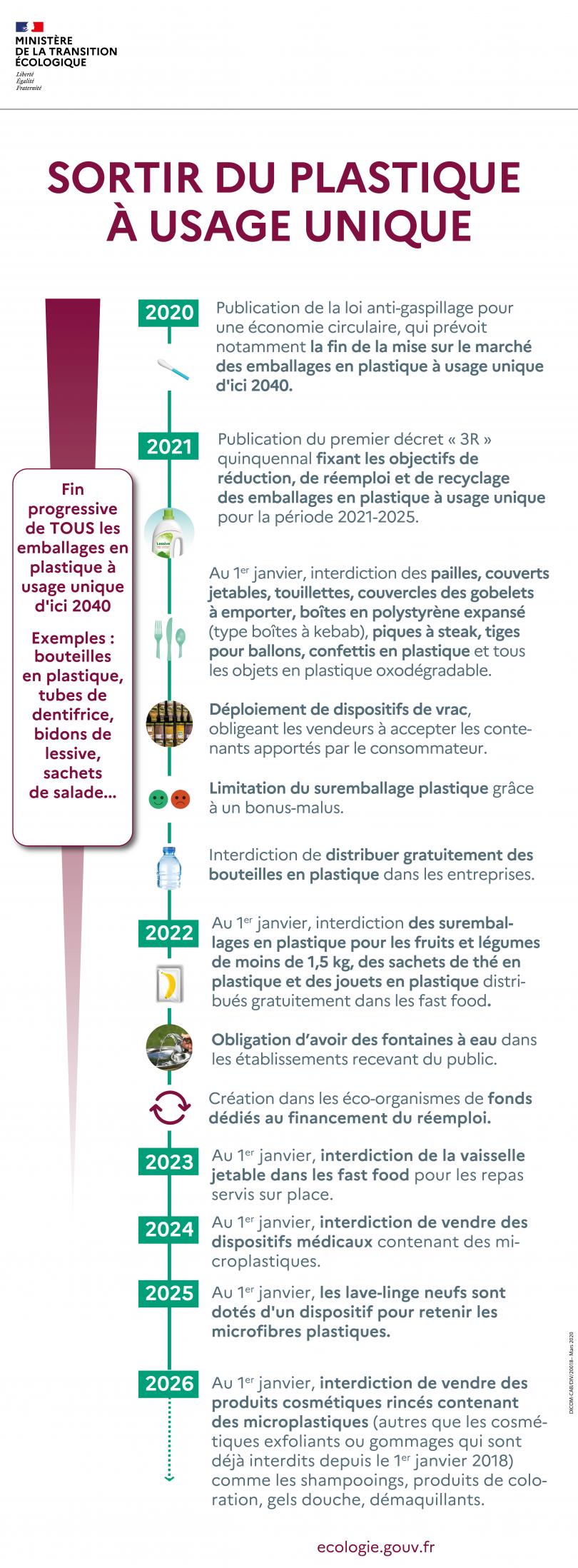
: Blame Shifting

**Fig. 2.** Plastic as out of place.



Source: <https://electricite9.blog4ever.com/le-plastique-non-merci>

**Fig. 3.** Plastic regulations focusing on single-use plastic.



Source: <https://www.ecologie.gouv.fr/lutte-contre-pollution-plastique>

**Fig. 4.** Coca-Cola’s promotional material co-branding “No Time to Time” in movie theaters.

A picture containing indoor, red

Description automatically generated