

# Products for life

*by Jeanne Guien*

---

**“Who extends the life of objects, nowadays?” Julie Madon’s sociological study on “longeviters” shows the diversity of their profiles and motivations, as well as the specific practices of sustainability and the controversies they give rise to.**

---

About: Julie Madon, *Faire durer les objets. Pratiques et ressources dans l’art de déconsommer* (Making Objects Last: Practices and Resources in the Art of De-Consuming), Paris, Éditions Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2024, 268 p., €22., ISBN : 9782724642759

Julie Madon’s book is adapted from her doctoral thesis in sociology, which she devoted, between 2018 and 2023, to sustainability activists in France: supporters of the *Halte à l’Obsolescence Programmée* (“Stop Planned Obsolescence”) association, volunteers and members of the public at Repair Cafés, DIY enthusiasts and zero-waste campaigners. However, it focuses less on their involvement in these structures than on their day-to-day relationship with their objects at home, thus combining the sociology of social movements with the ethnography of material culture.

This double empirical contribution is more than welcome. Indeed, most of the essays on programmed obsolescence published in France over the last fifteen years have been underpinned only by technical surveys or botched, even erroneous, historical accounts. Julie Madon, for her part, reports on and analyses the data from her fieldwork on multiple sites: interviews, photographs and observations of the

relationship between objects and well-informed nonetheless ordinary consumers. Ordinarity is even at the heart of her survey. People are invited to talk about their private material environment and the steps they have taken to maintain it. The research subject is both heuristic (objects are everybody's concern!) and problematic (everyday life is of no interest to anyone!). Through their anecdotes, concerns and revolts, the respondents are invited to put words on the oft-silent management of their material environment, revealing strategies, efforts and "longevity practices". The author provides a sociological analysis of the causes underlying these practices, making the link between consumer goods, "life histories, human relationships, social norms" (p. 6), the "career of objects" and the trajectory of subjects (p. 20).

"Who extends the life of objects today?", asks the researcher (p. 11). Her response takes the form of a typology, showing that there are different profiles of "longevity enthusiasts": these are not all young urban graduates and ecologists. The most recurrent profiles are also older rural households, "settled" in areas with equipment and space for DIY and storage; "consumerists", affluent individuals who like to replace their equipment as new, are indifferent to environmental issues but fear being "ripped off"; and "city dwellers", are severely constrained by budget and space, conscientious, but aren't able to become DIY enthusiasts. This typology has the merit of complexifying the spontaneous categorisation of sustainability movements (associated with the eternal repulsive figure of the *bobo* i.e. the "Bourgeois bohemian"). It could go even further, and suffers undoubtedly from the limitations of the sample, which the author points out is not sufficiently diverse and presents a recruitment bias. The research needs to be broadened, and the "urban" category in particular needs to be expanded, to make it representative of the French population. One could then fully test the most interesting issue of the book, namely the fact that social circulation of identical practices varies the judgement we make of them, and even the perception we have of them: "The same low-impact ecological practices can be highly valued when adopted by the privileged classes who associate them with an ecological rhetoric, and on the contrary delegitimised when adopted by the working classes who are constrained in their consumption." (p. 233). Such a remark shows the importance of sociology for ecologist strategies, and can account for the hold of the spontaneous categorisation with which the author herself had to contend.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Madon M., « Lutter contre l'obsolescence programmée, pas qu'une affaire de bobos » (Fighting against programmed obsolescence, not just a bobo concern), *The Conversation*, 12 December 2019.

The typology of the different meanings of “making it last” is also very welcome, as it is more detailed and empirical than those proposed, for example, by the Ademe.<sup>2</sup>

Another fundamental aspect of the book is to show that the will to make things last generates tension. This insistence also politicises the subject: making things last means deviating from the consumerist norm (according to which “we consume nothing of what we produce, and we produce nothing of what we consume”<sup>3</sup>) and this dynamic generates power relations. In particular, it confronts us with the gendered division of domestic labour, which is well captured by the author, who notes that men specialise in DIY and cultural goods, while women specialise in care practices and household equipment. It also shows that, contrary to the idea that nothing is passed on from one generation to the next, intergenerational donation is still common (or even happens more often, as people renew their homes and furniture more frequently) and is often carried out by older women. The book is thus a solid contribution to the feminist criticism of the field, which has shown in particular the role of women in maintenance and zero waste.<sup>4</sup> A larger sample of respondents would undoubtedly make it possible to identify other power dynamics.

Regrettably, the book contains a number of recurring problems in the media and political treatment of planned obsolescence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, the typology of the three forms of obsolescence (technical, psychological, programmed), which has been the subject of much controversy on the subject, remains shaky and leads to oversimplifications: phenomena such as “fatigue, fashion, technological evolution” are lumped together without further detail, even though they are crucial to understanding the renewal of goods (p. 83). One would like to understand more about this respondent who, after struggling to justify a change of coffee machine, declares: “I don’t know, I just wanted change” (p. 177). Are we not dealing here with an instance of “magnificent tautology(ies) through which the social dimension becomes apparent” as described by Bourdieu?<sup>5</sup> These distinctions would need to be developed and refined beyond the obvious.

---

<sup>2</sup> Anderson G. et al, *Étude sur la durée de vie des équipements électriques et électroniques*, Ademe report, 2012; Chauvin C., Fangeat E. and *Allongement de la durée de vie des produits*, study for the Ademe, February 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Gorz A., *Ecologica*, Galilée, Paris, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Guien J., Hajek I., Ollitraut S., « Femmes et lutte contre le gaspillage : un espace d’émancipation ou d’aliénation genrée ? », *Écologie et Politique*, Le Bord de l’eau, n°60, April 2020 ; Denis J. et Pontille D., *Le soin des choses. Politiques de la maintenance*, La Découverte, Paris, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, *La domination masculine*, Seuil, Paris, 1998 (*Masculine Domination*, Stanford University Press, 2001)

In the same way, Madon uses the terms “political discourse” and “rhetoric of suspicion” (p. 200) to describe the comments of a respondent complaining about the cost and inefficiency of the after-sales service she consulted for her broken printer. Why reproduce this equivalence, beloved of all journalists, politicians and company representatives who, for the last 15 years, have presented critics of programmed obsolescence as conspiracists and ideologues? Madon’s work also shows that rhetoric alone does not lead consumers to the diagnosis of programmed obsolescence: reading instructions for use, visiting an after-sales service or the experience of repairs (happy or unhappy) – in other words, material and social experiences – force them to face the reality. Perhaps this aspect would have come out better if the author had made more room for observations in her work, which for the time being focuses on accounts obtained through interviews.

This concession to “suspicion” may also be explained by the fact that the researcher excludes from the survey “consumable products (plastic cups, ballpoint pens, etc.), which are made to be thrown away and are less relevant when talking about lifespan” (p. 13). Why should they be less relevant? These “consumable” or “disposable” products are examples of programmed obsolescence, and it is not true that their lifespan, in order to be prescribed, is more obvious than that of the other objects studied – that using them does not lead to “daily trade-offs” (p. 34) and strategies among sustainability activists. There is even a good chance that their use is particularly problematic for the latter, since these products are not all “single-use”, depleted in a single act of consumption: they have variable lifespans and are often the subject of numerous “adaptations”, ways of living with the dysfunctional that the author so aptly describes. In fact, at least one quote from the book shows that this subject is relevant to understanding the motivations of the respondents (p. 134). Excluding disposable products from the study on obsolescence and durability, as most of the players in the controversies on this subject have done, is therefore unjustified, and tends to give tautological credence to the “suspicion” approach: by focusing only on objects whose lifespan is not officially limited, the study is restricted to objects whose lifespan is limited in a hidden, deceptive way. This approach is an aspect of the field (the association of programmed obsolescence with “scams”, dear to “consumerists”) that needs to be objectified through analysis, and not reproduced therein.

We would also have liked to see one of the strong words in the title, such as “de-consuming”, developed further in the body of the work – especially because it is an ambiguous word, used as a slogan by many players, without a clear definition. It

could have usefully benefitted from the author's undeniable ability to complexify, through empirical analysis, so many subjects simplified by their political use: if, as the book clearly shows, the slogan "making things last" is far from simple to understand and apply, what about the watchword "de-consuming"?

Published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), September 23, 2024. Translated by Tiam Goudarzi with the support of Cairn.info. Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), November 20, 2025.