

contacted another group of owners and renewed their advice. This time it was accompanied by a proposal that the list of owners who were to take part in the fuel economy campaign would be published in the local newspapers. Each one gave a written commitment to allow his name to be published. Thus they would give an example of good citizenship. The repercussions were immediate. After one month it was found that the homeowners who had signed this pledge had indeed consumed less fuel, to a significant amount. In order to ensure that the publicity they were to be given had not affected them in any way, they were warned that in the end the list of names would not be published. This announcement had no negative effect; on the contrary, this group's fuel consumption continued to decrease throughout the winter.

In making this choice and commitment, the people concerned put themselves in a different situation and were borne along by its logic. Once converted, the householders began to see themselves as economizers leading a struggle against the waste of energy. They created new habits for themselves and sought to convince themselves that it was essential to reduce energy imports. In short, they acquired a different image of themselves and their way of life, and put a different gloss on their actions. This is why they respected the contract they had entered into, even if no publicity had been given to their gesture (Pallak et al., 1980).

Although we can have no absolute certainty regarding this, these explanations have the ring of truth. Thus they bring us closer to a different conception of the role of the group. This is, that it mobilizes the intellectual and affective potentialities of each one of its members by making them participate in a collective action, not in order to increase cohesion, but to allow them to breach together the barrier of norms from which, if faced alone, they would recoil. Such a 'mobilization' is observed in the ordinary course of social life, but is even more remarkable in the privileged fields of science and technology. Nowadays epistemology emphasizes the place of discussion and controversy in the choice of a research subject, of a method, or of the meaning assigned to the results. The researchers' interest in such and such a subject is measured by the 'gossip test' (Crick, 1990). By this is meant that the subject that absorbs them is the one occurring most frequently in conversations, when these take place between the greatest possible number of colleagues. Other subjects may well occupy their minds, but if they are not aired in such chatter, they arouse only little curiosity in the scientific community and do not engage its deepest attention. Hence those countless meetings, colloquia, seminars and talks, which it would be wrong to see as mere adjuncts to research. They are the energizing batteries designed to influence the choice of ideas or opposing facts.

Even if such permanent, shifting gatherings do not of themselves constitute a remedy for dissent, they are an indication that consensus is in the process of formation. This is what, within the scientific framework, gives them meaning. The formation of disagreements preparatory to forming an agreement appears to be a method for testing out new concepts. This is