

CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (CDO)

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INTERROGATING THE POLITICS OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

PLANETARY BOUNDARIES ARE EXCEEDED, BUT THE SOLUTION IS AROUND THE CORNER (OR IS IT?)

Amidst growing concerns over climate change, disappearing biodiversity and competition over resources, the circular economy (CE) has over the last few years risen as a ray of hope. The European Union, for example, has made the development of a CE one of the central ambitions of its Green Deal. By 2050, we should have left the current linear take-make-dispose economy behind, with its waste heaps and material losses. Instead, over the following years, the economy has to be redesigned towards a circular system in which resource use is reduced, re-use and repair of products have become standard practices, and materials are recycled on a large scale. To realise that vision, new technologies are promoted to optimize material chains and close material loops, innovative business models will replace products by services, product design enhances longevity and reparability of products, and consumers becomes users for whom sharing is the new owning.

The CE paints a very optimistic image of the future. The official storyline promises that the CE will stimulate the growth and competitiveness of the EU economy, business opportunities will abound, a lot of new jobs will be created, resource independence will be enhanced, waste will virtually disappear, CO₂ emissions will be greatly reduced and raw materials will be saved. The future seems full of win-win-win situations. Is it really?



Circularity can only succeed when other questions are addressed as well. (Visual source: Veienturf and Purnell, 2021)

TOWARDS CIRCULARITY ++

The research about circular economy at CDO starts from the premise that the development of a CE during the next decades is an absolute necessity, but that the problems with the linear economy run much deeper than just the way it handles resources and waste. The effort of restructuring the economy towards circularity only makes sense and can only succeed when other questions are addressed as well. Otherwise, the CE risks becoming the next technocratic project that only values innovation in a context of markets and business opportunities.

Our scholarship aims to broaden the CE debate to:



The problematic narrative of economic growth and absolute decoupling ('green growth')



Social and environmental impacts of extractivist value chains



The lack of global justice and the reproduction of inequalities



The current non-democratic governance in the transition



The continuous expansion of markets and commodification



The absence of reflexivity around sufficiency and scale

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Which different interpretations/discourses of a CE transition are at play?
- Whose interests get priority? Who wins, who loses?
- How can different forms of knowledge shape the transition to the CE?
- How do actors try to change institutions?
- How are citizens already involved in circular practices?
- Which underlying economic beliefs shape CE narratives and decision-making processes and how?

RESEARCH PROJECTS

- Diverse circularities: self-organised and decommodified repair and waste reuse practices (Irma Emmery)
- Institutional dynamics in product-service systems (Jonas Van Gaubergen)
- CO₂ recovery, solar fuels and hydrogen (Kasper Ampe)
- CE as driver of regional development (Abe Hendriks)
- Politics and governance of a circular plastics economy (Nur Gizem Yalcin, Kasper Ampe)
- Business model innovation for firms in the circular plastics economy (Fernando Lit)