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Perspective

## Redefining Wellbeing and Normality: Circular Consumption Beyond the Low Hanging Fruit

M. Borrello<sup>a,\*</sup>, L. Cembalo<sup>a</sup>, V. D'Amico<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Dept. of Agricultural Sciences, AgEcon and Policy Group, University of Naples Federico II - Via Università 100, 80055 Portici, Italy<sup>b</sup> CREA PB, Council for Agricultural Research and Economics, Research Centre for Agricultural Policies and Bioeconomy - Via Po, 14, 00198 Rome, Italy

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Achieving a more circular economy (CE) has recently become one of the main objectives of the EU political agenda and the key point of transformation discourses on sustainability. Aiming to revert the incumbent linear extract-produce-use-dump material and energy flow, transitioning into CE has been hitherto proposed as a necessary and radical trajectory, able to redefine growth and generate unprecedented changes to the global economy. In the context of these ambitious accomplishments, reshaping consumer behaviour is a central tenet of the CE theoretical toolkit. As the lifespan of material goods is decreased over time due to consumers' premature perceived obsolescence, CE envisions consumers embracing different values in their purchases, replacing utility with frugality, and refusing mainstream consumption (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018). The philosophical underpinning of this tenet is that a sustainable economy requires a novel and politicized 'consumer-citizen', more aware and committed towards the stewardship of communities and natural resources and having an eco-centrist worldview that provides guidance on the principles to organize his economic behaviour.

Against this backdrop, it is a wonderment that the way in which the CE narrative has been put into action so far is ambivalent at best. Making a strong economic argument to push business actors to integrate CE into their agenda has been a major effort of European institutions and of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF). The effects of this endeavour are materialized, for example, in the launch of the EMF 'CE 100' programme, a group of corporations (e.g., Google, Ikea and Danone) cooperating in a pre-competitive network working on various recycling

strategies. Therefore, notwithstanding the humanistic outlook of its narrative, current CE implementation focuses in practice on innovative efficiency-driven supply, reproducing a traditional model of business-led economic growth. Besides the fact that business actors have commercial goals at odds with the sustainability need of reducing global consumption levels, consumers' role in this process seems severely dismissed. To illustrate, consumers are called to respond to sustainable labelling and buy 'green', or to take part to access consumption models in which usership replaces ownership. In the worst-case scenario, consumers are expected to just keep supporting greenwashed unsustainable businesses. (See, for example, the new circular value proposition of Nespresso, ironically built on the commercialization of single use aluminium coffee pods).

What has been said seems to us an impoverished view of consumers, that clashes with the radical sustainability transition posited by first CE proponents. Persuading consumers to accept novel business models and product designs revolving around more efficient technologies sounds like to abdicate the human-centric transformation firstly posited by the CE narrative. Instead, this reboots an old weak ecological modernization discourse, strongly relying on individuals' willingness to become 'green consumers'. This burden of expectations placed on us seems to neglect the fact that, to date, policy and practitioners' initiatives to stimulate sustainable consumption have failed to have notable impact on individuals' behaviours (Hobson and Lynch, 2016). It is worth also noting that, amongst the stimuli to buy circular products, there are no hints on how the CE would solve the Jevon's Paradox: if the economy will not

\* Corr-author: M. Borrello

E-mail address: [massimiliano.borrello@unina.it](mailto:massimiliano.borrello@unina.it) (M. Borrello).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2021.106034>

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become more service-orientated, lowered prices due to cheap recycled materials will risk boosting even more consumption. Therefore, at least in the domain of consumers' behaviour, current CE implementation fails to address the very roots of the unsustainability of contemporary societies, that is a *consumption culture in which materialism governs individuals' lifestyles*.

The central point of the current perspective is that, besides traditional (e.g., information provision) and modern (e.g., nudging) approaches to steer consumer decision making processes towards circular businesses, a transformation of consumption culture is needed to achieve long-term sustainability. More specifically, we posit that in the future, transformation discourses on sustainability should be devoted to two realms of consumer culture: *wellbeing* and *normality*. As for *wellbeing*, if one looks at the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, individuals' consumption habits are often targeted towards self-actualization and esteem needs. In rich societies where basic personal needs are fully fulfilled, consumption (note: either through ownership or access) is central in individuals' lifestyles and is perceived as instrumental in wellbeing. Due to a lack of concrete alternative lifestyle options, material satisfiers strongly contribute to individuals' aspiration to status, novelty and respect, which, in turn, respond to the human quest for a meaningful life. As for the second realm mentioned above, i.e. *normality*, we refer to the fact that consumption – either concerning a new sweater, a plane ticket or the domestic heating –, is a habituated phenomenon, mostly carried out without conscious reflection. According to Vargas-Madrado (2018, p.3–4), “We swim and live in the sea of modernity and postmodernity to the extent that we never notice it [...] most of the time we are no longer aware that we exist, think, consume, love, and die within it”. This is in line with a sociological account that sees consumption as stemming from individuals' daily routinized behaviours (Shove, 2004). By this notion, all forms of consumption characterizing dominant lifestyles are daily practices institutionalized in cultural norms and in the socio-technical environment, and that unquestioningly define normality. This explains the emergence of consumption habits satisfying inessential functionalities, such as multiple televisions for single-person households.

Therefore, even though circular business models can extend products lives, they do little to change individuals' conception of wellbeing, that is a major driving force of overconsumption. Furthermore, albeit circular technologies can reduce the environmental footprint of consumption goods, if they keep revolving around unsustainable consumption habits, they do not contribute to redefine normality, where this is opportune. This being said, our analysis suggests a plea for strategies promoting lifestyles based on *sufficiency*. A more radical approach to sustainable consumption transformation – than that shown in current CE implementation –, should encourage recipes based on the more desirable options of the waste hierarchy (refuse, reduce and reuse), while keep ensuring fundamental livelihoods. There are already

examples of sufficiency-driven business models that seek to mitigate absolute consumption levels. For example, these businesses focus on phasing out planned obsolescence through novel product designs based on durability and reparability, on less manipulative promotion tactics, or on consumers' education and nudging (Bocken and Short, 2016). Since these businesses are fundamentally geared towards satisfying ‘needs’ rather than promoting ‘wants’, changing dominant ways in which people perceive wellbeing and normality is critical for their success. To drive the path of this post-consumerist society scenario, *new narratives* that challenge the status quo, articulate attractive modalities to conceive ‘the good life’, and de-legitimize and de-normalize unsustainable consumption choices, are required. These narratives should contest older lifestyles and conventions around which society is currently organized. Current EU political agenda on CE strongly stimulate research on closed-loop technology and business models, but its orientation, if there is any, on how trigger long-term transformation of consumer culture is unclear. The current perspective claims that this agenda aspires in the future to a more thoughtful understanding of how consumption practices considered as ‘normal’ are reproduced, and how to inspire the emergence of more conscious consumers having a renewed notion of wellbeing.

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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