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Imagined futures of the Circular Economy

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Abstract

The essay sketches some lines of enquiry into how 'everyday futures' are imagined in discourse around 'the Circular Economy'. The Circular Economy is offered as a model for a significantly more environmentally sustainable economy, an alternative to the current "linear economy" of "make, use, dispose" (WRAP, n.d.). The discourse has grown in prominence in recent years, with the EU recently reframing its policy commitments to sustainable production and consumption in terms of the Circular Economy (EC 2015). We examine examples from the national contexts of Estonia, Italy and the United Kingdom, and the EU level, to explore how everyday life and consumption are imagined in the future of the Circular Economy. We offer some initial sketches, drawing on practice theory (e.g. Schatzki, 2002) and conventions theory or 'pragmatic sociology' (e.g. Boltanki and Thévenot, 2006; Thévenot, 2001) and suggest further theoretical articulations to be pursued through the empirical area.

Introduction

This essay begins to think about how 'everyday futures' are imagined in discourse and practice around 'the Circular Economy'. The Circular Economy is offered as a model for a significantly more environmentally sustainable economy—a blueprint for an alternative future to the current "linear economy" of "make, use, dispose" (WRAP, n.d.)— and of resilience in the face of resource insecurity and the potential disruptions of ecological crisis. With Mische (2014), we argue for the importance of the task of analysing such "sites of heightened, future-oriented public debate about possible futures", or "sites of hyperprojectivity" (p. 437). Projects and visions of collective futures mobilise—sometimes conflicting—understandings of the common good, or "orders of worth" (Stark 2009; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), actual or imagined "teleoaffective" engagements (Schatzki, 2002; Welch and Warde, 2017), and implicit models of engagement with everyday life (and in the case of circular economy, centrally, of consumption). Such imagined futures may come to invest professional practices, political spaces, and everyday consumption. We approach the task from a dual theoretical background in practice theory (e.g. Schatzki, 2002; Warde, 2005) and conventions theory or 'pragmatic sociology' (e.g. Boltanki and Thévenot, 2006; Thévenot, 2001, 2014)[i]. Our intuition is that the project of the Circular Economy provides a productive site in which concepts from these two theoretical traditions may encounter one another in the context of projected everyday futures. This essay offers some initial thoughts on what is intended to be a larger project to articulate these theoretical positions together, with the goal to enrich and develop understandings of the cultural dimensions of projections of socio-technical everyday futures (see Jasanoff and Kim, 2009, 2015). In this essay we simply sketch some lines of enquiry, drawing on examples from the national contexts of Estonia, Italy and the United Kingdom, and the EU level.

Circular Economy and the European Union

The project of the Circular Economy has grown to prominence in recent years, drawing on an inheritance in the field of industrial ecology (e.g. Clift and Druckman, 2016; cf. Gregson et al., 2015) or "cradle-to-cradle" design (Braungart and McDonough, 2002), and "natural capitalism" (Hawken et al., 1999). In the imagined future of the Circular Economy, as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation put it, the very "concept of waste" would be eliminated (UCL, n.d.), with resources and materials cycling through the economy on the model of a

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nutrient cycle. The principle of “eco-efficiency”, which carries within it the logic of the steam engine—“efficiency” is defined as the ratio of useful output to total input—is replaced by that of “‘eco-effectiveness’, highlighting the potentially infinite contribution of materials to the generation of value” (Mylan, et al., 2016: 2).

The European Commission has recently reframed its commitments to a “resource efficient Europe” of waste reduction and recycling (EC 2011) in terms of the Circular Economy (EC 2014), with an EU “action plan for the Circular Economy” recently published (EC 2015). A number of non-governmental organisations and think tanks, notably the Ellen MacArthur Foundation in the UK, have championed the project of Circular Economy, and engaged in business and academic collaborations. As Gregson et al. (2015: 221) note “idealized visions of the circular economy” are of a new, producer-led, industrial revolution, of “industrial symbiosis” and products designed for extended lifetimes and end-of-life recyclability as new material inputs. However, the policy reality is, thus far, largely one of enhanced, post-consumer waste management (Gregson et al., 2015).

Levels of engagement with the project by member states and regions of the EU varies widely. A critical report from the UK parliament noted that “instead of scaling up its work” on Circular Economy the UK Government “ is cutting it back” and “lacks leadership” (EAC 2014: 3). On the other hand, in the UK, think tanks, often in collaboration with business and academia, have been active in promoting the Circular Economy. In Estonia, the situation is reversed: on the formal government policy level Estonia is tightly engaged with EU developments, however there is little civil society, academic or media engagement with the concept, outside of the waste processing sector. Italy is similarly politically engaged, playing a very active role at EU level and in May 2015 organized an informal meeting in Rome with other EU states to stimulate dialogue on the Circular Economy ahead of publication of the EU action plan (EC 2015).

Circular Economy, Consumption and Everyday Futures

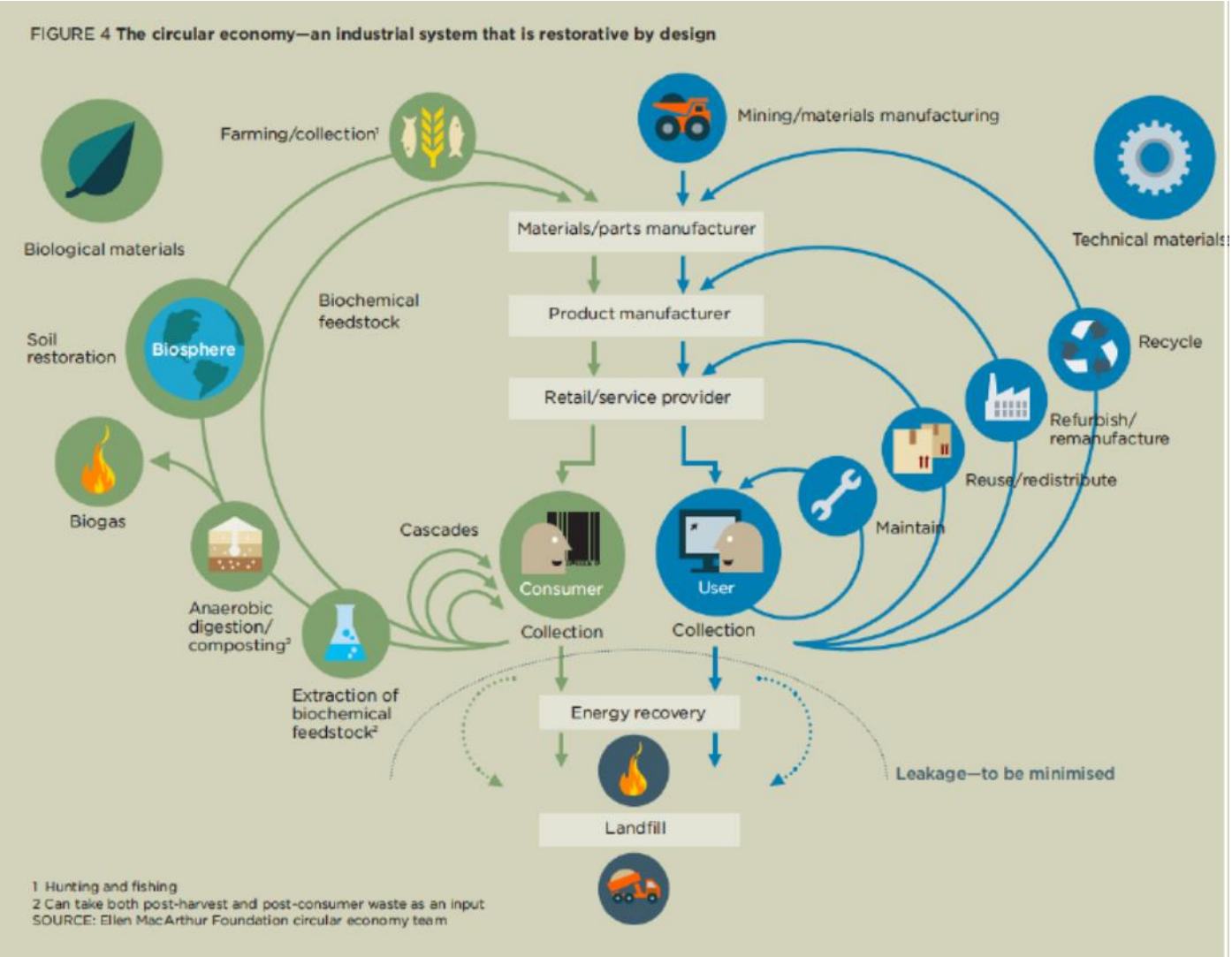
As Gregson et al. (2015) note there has been little critical engagement with the concept and vision of Circular Economy. While Gregson et al. (2015: 225) focus on the normative exclusions of the geographically bounded EU vision of Circular Economy and the “collisions of morality, materiality and market logics” that will likely form the ground of its political contestation, our concern is with both the “orders of worth” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) and imagined futures of everyday life and consumption invoked within visions and models of Circular Economy, as well as the “dimensions of projectivity”, or dimensions of variation in future-orientation, expressed by them (Mische, 2014).

We take as an entry point the observation of recent social scientific engagements with the Circular Economy (e.g. Antikainen et al 2015; Jensen 2016; Mylan et al., 2016) that current models “fall short in regard to the conceptualisation of ‘consumption’ and ‘consumers’” and, as Mylan et al. (2016: 2) note, the particular “lack of attention paid to the domestic sphere, an important site and space for the enactment of practices which shape how and why consumers use particular products and services, how ‘waste’ is generated, and ultimately how this might be changed.”

Some widespread definitions of the Circular Economy tend to elide the domain of everyday life and consumption, even as the “use” stage remains the central pivot to the entire model, as in this definition from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation:

> "A circular economy keeps products, components and materials at their highest utility and value, at all times, eliminating the concept of waste, with materials ultimately re-entering the economy at end of use as defined, valuable technical or biological nutrients."

Compare here the centrality of “Consumer” and “User” in a widely reproduced graphical representation of the Foundation’s model:



This said, the centrality of the domain of use and consumption is routinely acknowledged in reports and policy statements. An Estonian Government press release rehearses a common pattern in policy documents reviewed thus far[ii], welcoming changes to the Ecodesign Directive that will “enhance the reparability, durability, and recyclability of products” (Envir.ee, 2016) whilst offering little to nothing by way of the projectivity of everyday life and consumption in which products will be routinely repaired, not replaced, and recycled. Between the design stage on the one hand and, on the other, the end-of-life (waste management and resource recovery) of ‘circular’ products, the use stage of products in the Circular Economy and their users are largely absent. Yet, the same press release assumes the role of the consumer in everyday life to be crucial, with the Minister of the Environment stressing that: “Fulfilling the set objective implies everyone’s contribution [including] reasonable and conscious behaviour of individuals [which] reduces needless consumption” (ibid). Typically for political discourse on environmental sustainability the consumer here is portrayed almost in caricature as a rational and calculative agent, or having the responsibility to become one. At the same time, however, the consumer’s assumed engagement with the project of Circular Economy is deeply normative, implying the necessity of a strong motivational commitment in and orientation towards radically changed consumption norms and practices, whilst shorn of any projected context in which those changes might be assumed to take place.

Consumption does feature as a key domain within the EU action plan document (EC 2015), however, here again we note the restrictive, individualised, behaviourial model of social action through which consumption is framed. (We discuss the practice theoretical critique of this model of consumption below). The action plan section on "Consumption" begins:

> "The choices made by millions of consumers can support or hamper the circular economy. These choices are shaped by the information to which consumers have access, the range and prices of existing products, and the regulatory framework." (EC 2015: 6)

And proceeds to largely rehearse the conventional tools through which sustainable consumption policy has been framed by the EU since its outset: eco-labelling, price incentives, household waste reduction and recycling.

Orders of Worth and Projectivity

We also note in the EU action plan's "Consumption" section (EC 2015) the absence of general statements of value or normative exhortations to action, the effect of which is to frame the domain of consumption within market and industrial "orders of worth" (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006). That is to say the conventional forms of worth to justify a future orientation towards Circular Economy are framed through general understandings of, on the one hand, profit maximization and competition (market order) and on the other productivity, efficiency and instrumentality (industrial order). Notable then is not only the absence of an ecological order of worth but a gesture beyond the model of industrial efficiency towards "eco-effectiveness" through which the Circular Economy claims to distinguish itself (Mylan et al., 2016).

Thevenot et al (2000), Chiapello (2013) and others (e.g. Finch et al., 3013; Blok, 2013) have explored the emergence of an ecological or green order of worth, commonly in contestation or collision with market and industrial orders. We note variation in the invocation of orders of worth across our pilot study documents. Justification processes in official government texts are generally not very elaborate, drawing upon taken for granted, naturalised key-words, such as "sustainable" and "competitive". In our Estonian example the ecological, industrial and market orders of worth are all invoked, adjectives signalling different orders are placed side by side, eliminating conflict between them, and normalising a future imaginary that sets competition, efficiency and ecological sustainability all in harmony:

> "Estonia supports most of the measures in the Circular Economy Package of the European Commission, which aim to promote the growth of competitive and sustainable economy in the European Union by increasing more effective and sustainable implementation of resources within the entire product value chain." (Envir.ee, 2016)

Noting that "Sustainable consumption, production, and innovation are the keywords in developing new business models and markets", the Estonian Minister of Environment collapses the market and green orders into one, making "sustainability" an inherent part of a new business order of the Circular Economy. We note here that while such collisions may signal contradiction and conflict, a strand of research into orders of worth has focused on the how such dissonance may itself act as a form of coordination (e.g. Finch et al., 2013); or how as Stark (2009: 191) puts it "misunderstandings produced through such discordant attributions may in fact facilitate as opposed to thwart coordination among heterogeneous actors within and across organizations". This noted, critical for the environmental claims of the Circular Economy model here is that, as one commentator has put it, "the exact relationship between circularity that maximizes profits and circularity that minimizes environmental benefits is unclear" (Van Ewijk, 2014,n.p.).
In our Italian example we note how the dimensions of projectivity (Mische, 2014) themselves militate away from the necessary long term future orientation of the ecological order of worth. Here the documentation shows almost no protension, or rhetorical extension, toward the future. The word future very rarely appears and the discourse is in general flattened by the a-temporality of the economic language, the prevalence of

the present tense and the absence of future-characterizing nouns (such as aspirations, challenge, progress, vision etc.). What seems to be at stake is more the short time destiny of the Italian economy than the long-term environmental and everyday futures. The transition to a Circular Economy is most of the time presented as a resource for improving the competitiveness of the Italian economic system:

> "Here is an entrepreneurship that believes in Italy and in Europe, which knows to bet on innovation environment, now a decisive element for competitiveness in the global market. [And which] serves to project ourselves in the only possible future, the circular economy and sustainable development as the cornerstone of doing business." (MDA 2016)

In the Italian policy documents we find the market order of worth the primary frame, with the green frame in a way a new marketing strategy for Italian economic competitiveness. This partly reflects the strong need of the Italian government to support its entrepreneurial system in the global economy but also carries all the fragility and inherent tensions of green orders of worth, as elsewhere analysed (Finch et al., 2016, Thèvenot et al., 2000).

Dissonance between orders of worth and the relation of projectivity to those orders are fruitful lines of further enquiry. Lastly, we note the tentative possibility that the articulations of general understandings from ecological, industrial and market orders suggests an emergent Circular Economy order of worth struggling to coherently compose itself from disparate elements.

Circular Economy as a New Model of Consumption

The EU action plan does note "innovative forms of consumption" (EC 2015: 7) as supporting the development of the Circular Economy and thus gestures towards imagined novel practices of consumption assumed by the models. Here the action plan rehearses a common collection of elements: "sharing products or infrastructure (collaborative economy), consuming services rather than products, or using IT or digital platforms" (ibid.). As a recent UK policy briefing note comments: "Moving to a circular economy will require changes in how people consume products" (POST 2016: 1). Business and think tank discourse on the Circular Economy tends to frame the future of everyday life in terms of radical change, "profound transformational opportunity" as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation puts it (EMF 2013), conceived largely through the disruptive effects of digital technologies, ubiquitous computing, 'big data' and social media, and the reconfiguration of consumption and work practices that these trends produce. "Collaborative consumption" and models of "product-service systems" are routinely invoked here, suggesting a profound shift away from private ownership of products to a new service model of provision. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation invokes everyday futures of consumption in the Circular Economy as:

> "A new model of collaborative consumerism —in which consumers embrace services that enable them to access products on demand rather than owning them—and collaborative consumption models that provide more interaction between consumers, retailers, and manufacturers." (EMF 2013: 10)

This imagined "collaborative consumerism" is also a more community-based and localised economy, in some of its circuits at least. What is imagined here is a future of consumption which embraces not only novel business models and consumption practices but novel consumption norms and affective engagements. The POST (2016) UK policy briefing acknowledges the complex challenges of such change, while noting current trends suggestive of possible trajectories towards the transformational horizon, for example:

> "The growth of charity shops, platforms like eBay and initiatives like Repair Cafes (where volunteers help fix household items) suggest an acceptance of reuse." (2013: 4)

We note here how Circular Economy discourse segues with the problematic framing of the "Sharing Economy". Both draw on disparate existing elements projected into an imagined future of consumption

transformed—grass roots projects such as novel digital platforms to share goods and services (such as Freecycle and Streetbank) on the one hand and 'disruptive' capitalist enterprises such as Uber and AirBnB on the other. In so doing such models of Circular or Sharing Economy elide the deeply conflicting orientations and orders of worth these different elements manifest.

Tentative conclusions and further development

The imagined futures of the Circular Economy often elide everyday life, even whilst acknowledging the centrality of consumption to the model. More expansive imaginaries of everyday futures posit radically changed forms of consumption, such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's "collaborative consumerism". These imagined everyday futures assume transformed consumption norms and affective engagements, whilst offering little by way of projected context as to how such changes will come about, and a simplistic understanding of consumption. The understanding of consumption that develops from theories of practice is not of consumption as the individual satisfaction of needs, but as a "moment" within the pursuit everyday social practices—eating, parenting, driving, office work, etc. (Warde, 2005; cf. Warde et al. 2017). This understanding of consumption alters the position and nature of the consumer. Firstly, against mainstream understandings of consumption—reflected in the policy documents analysed above— in which the consumer is characterised as rationally pursuing activity driven by a pre-set portfolio of preferences, needs and wants, practice theory stresses the habitual, embodied and unreflective aspects of consumption (see Warde & Southerton 2012; cf. Warde et al., 2017). Secondly, the figure of 'the consumer' is decentred from accounts of consumption, which foreground rather the dynamics of practices. This account underscores how imagined futures of Circular Economy need to attend to transformations in dynamically related social practices rather than individualised consumption decisions and the purported attitudes and values that drive them (see Mylan et al. 2016).

This said, while practice theoretical approaches to sustainable consumption have proven generative, an area where they are weak is in addressing the evaluative and reflexive stance that actors are capable of taking towards practice. There is a particular pertinence here in the context of "the constitutive role that the future imaginary plays in reflective processes of critique, problem-solving, and social intervention" (Mische, 2014: 440). We suggest Thévenot's (2001) model of "regimes of engagement" may be productively articulated with a practice theoretical approach to address this lack. Thévenot (2001) suggests that in everyday life people engage with reality through different regimes, those of: familiarity—the habitual and unreflexive; regular planned action—conventional and intentional activity; and justification—public legitimation of action in situations of contestation (which take the form of "orders of worth"). When the aim is to address practices of consumption and support sustainable practices, we must take into account that these practices are rooted in everyday experience through different regimes of engagement (see, e.g. Cuzzocrea and Mandich, 2015).

Imaginaries such as "collaborative consumerism" tend to be projected from deeply contradictory trends—intensifications of commodification (such as AirBnB) on the one hand, and trends of decommodification, such as digital platforms enabling sharing (such as Streetbank) on the other—downplaying conflict between them. Similarly, Circular Economy discourse draws on dissonant market, industrial and ecological orders of worth; although whether this dissonance may itself prove to be a source of coordination is to be explored. The Circular Economy may even presage a novel order of worth.

We aim to explore these themes further, through novel theoretical engagements, of: social practices and "regimes of engagement" (Thévenot, 2001); "orders of worth" (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006) with that of Schatzki's (2002) concept of "general understandings" (cf. Welch and Warde, 2017); "teleoaffective regimes" (Schatzki, 2002; cf. Welch and Warde, 2017), that express orientation to common goals across multiple practices, with imagined futures; and the "modes of coordination" that orders of worth support, with the concept of "coordinating agents" of practices (Warde, 2013; Vihalemm, Keller, Kiisel, 2015).

Endnotes

[i] We note Evans (2011) and Truninger (2011) have articulated practice theory and conventions theory perspectives together in studies of consumption.

[ii] This sampling has by no means been a systematic and this statement represents simply a generalisation based on material reviewed thus far.

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