

Social Science Research And Public Policy-making: A Reappraisal

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The circular economy – a reappraisal of the ‘stuff’ we love

The circular economy – a reappraisal of the ‘stuff’ we love

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ABSTRACT: *New paradigms on systems thinking, natural resources and manufacturing futures provide opportunities to re-examine the relationship between humans, the things we buy and use, and the interconnected world that supplies them from primary resources. The role geography plays within industrial strategy can be strengthened, we argue, through the opportunities provided by a circular economy, i.e. one that is restorative by intent. Here, we consider some of the founding stimuli that underpin this reappraisal of our relationship with the things we buy and how circular economy thinking might play out in practice. As we demonstrate, there is a central role for geography here, and systems thinking, the trans-disciplinary analysis of trends and flows, temporal-spatial factors and the human condition are all central to this reappraisal.*

Context

Exploring the relationship between humans, the ‘stuff’ we buy and the economy in which it circulates is neither new, nor particularly fashionable in these straitened economic times. Nevertheless, a radical reappraisal is underway. In *The Waste Makers*, Vance Packard (a prominent 1960s social commentator and communicator) described, with much irony, some of the undesirable characteristics of unchecked mass production in his exploration of the 1950s automotive industry (Packard, 1960). Since painting his satirical ‘Cornucopia City’, a pastiche metropolis where material goods are produced in over-abundance beyond demand (Packard, 1960), other commentators have espoused a nagging concern about the business and environmental sustainability of globalisation. Reflecting on the challenges of resource efficiency and the industrial economy, geographers have become used to asking: how should businesses continue to create value for citizens, through the goods and services they provide, in a resource-constrained world? In the new ‘circular economy’ (for overviews, see Webster et al., 2013 and Webster, 2015) we discuss below, we might rephrase this question as: how can citizens access long-lasting service and performance from the stuff they value, and how might businesses function in response?

Here, we summarise the context and purpose of a circular economy and introduce readers to the practical consequences of a transition for industry and society. Our discussion raises many themes familiar to the subject of environmental governance.

In the late 1990s, the commentator, George Monbiot, remarked that ‘no one ever voted for austerity’ (Monbiot, 2006), and notions of cutting consumption, or innovating our way out of the economic corner we find ourselves in have fallen, largely, on deaf ears. These might be caricatures, but environmentalists seem too preachy, business leaders hold fervently to the bottom line, activists appear distant from commercial reality and corporate environmental goals are fine as long as the product portfolio grows. Thankfully, the

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