The Jus Semper Global Alliance

In Pursuit of the People and Planet Paradigm

Sustainable Human Development

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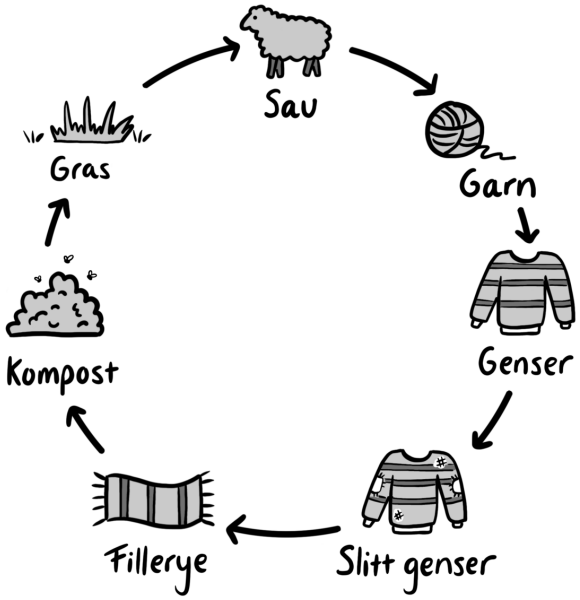
Marx on the Circular Economy

Benjamin Selwyn

Once a niche idea, the circular economy has become a buzzword, driven by climate anxiety and by policymakers and business leaders keen to burnish their green credentials. It is pitched as a new business paradigm.[1] Phrases like "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" are now widespread.

While the traditional "linear" business model runs on extraction → production → use → disposal, the circular economy promises something radically different. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation, its most prominent advocate, defines it as: "a system where materials never become waste and nature is regenerated…. [P]roducts and materials are kept in circulation through processes like maintenance, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacture, recycling, and composting."[2]



The illustration shows a classical recycling process for biological materials. By Elise Motalli - Own work, CC BY 4.0, Link.

The foundation, like many circular economy advocates, frames this as a win-win: good for the planet, good for firms' profits. Its novelty is part of the appeal—a break from business-as-usual.

Examples of these firms include BASF, a German multinational and the world's largest chemical producer, which has launched its ChemCycling project. Plastic waste is recycled into an industrial input—pyrolysis oil—which is then reused to produce new plastic products. Another example, from the fashion sector, is Primark's take-back scheme, where customers donate their unwanted clothes and the retailer recycles these into materials such as insulation and stuffing.

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1 ↩ Mattias Lindahl and Carl Dalhammar, "The Circular Economy: Towards a New Business Paradigm with Support from Public Policy," Stockholm Environment Institute, May 2022, sei.org.

2 ↩ "What Is the Meaning of a Circular Economy and What Are the Main Principles?," Ellen MacArthur Foundation, n.d., ellenmacarthurfoundation.org.

Like much ecomodernist thinking, mainstream notions of the circular economy aim to reboot capitalist growth in this time of ecological crisis. They do not mention, discuss, or seek to overcome capitalism's constitutive social relations—competitive accumulation and capital's exploitation of labour—that accelerate the system's ever-greater appropriation of nature. Rather, new business models are portrayed as delivering renewed growth through sustainability.

But, far from offering a new escape from capitalism's assault on nature, Karl Marx—writing over 150 years ago—had already identified strategies of capitalist production that look uncannily like today's notion of the circular economy. Such insights help locate circular economy discourse and practice in a longer trajectory of innovations under industrial capitalism.

In a section of the third volume of Capital entitled "Utilisation of the Excretions of Production," Marx detailed how "[t]he capitalist mode of production extends the utilisation of the excretions of production and consumption." These excretions include waste in industry and worn-out consumer goods. "In the chemical industry, for instance, excretions of production are such by-products as are wasted in production on a smaller scale; iron filings accumulating in the manufacture of machinery and returning into the production of iron as raw material."[3]

Competition drives the search by capital for innovative ways to reduce costs, but also requires sizeable investments and already existing scientific knowledge to enable such recycling/reuse:

> *Rising prices of raw materials naturally stimulate the utilisation of waste products. The general requirements for the re-employment of these excretions are: large quantities of such waste, such as are available only in large-scale production; improved machinery whereby materials, formerly useless in their prevailing form, are put into a state fit for new production; scientific progress, particularly of chemistry, which reveals the useful properties of such waste.*[4]

Further: "The most striking example of utilising waste is furnished by the chemical industry. It utilises not only its own waste, for which it finds new uses, but also that of many other industries. For instance, it converts the formerly almost useless gas-tar [coal tar, the heavy, tar-like by-product of coal gasification] into aniline dyes, alizarin [synthetic organic dyes], and, more recently, even into drugs."[5]

Beyond industry's reuse of material, old clothes and materials were reused. Marx quotes a factory inspector's report on Britain's wool industry:

> *It was once the common practice to decry the preparation of waste and woollen rags for re-manufacture, but the prejudice has entirely subsided as regards the SHODDY TRADE…. Demand for them has so increased that means have been found for utilising the rags of fabrics of cotton and wool mixed by destroying the cotton and leaving the wool intact, and now thousands of operatives are engaged in the manufacture of shoddy, from which the consumer has greatly benefited in being able to purchase cloth of a fair and average quality at a very moderate price.*[6]

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3 ↩ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Collected Works (New York: International Publishers, 1975), vol. 37, 103.
4 ↩ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 37, 103.
5 ↩ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 37, 104.
6 ↩ "Reports of Insp. of Factories, Oct. 1863," quoted in Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 37, 104.

Marx also distinguished between using and reducing waste in industrial production: "This economy of the excretions of production through their re-employment is to be distinguished from economy through the prevention of waste, that is to say, the reduction of excretions of production to a minimum, and the immediate utilisation to a maximum of all raw and auxiliary materials required in production."[7]

However, "Reduction of waste depends in part on the quality of the machinery in use…. It depends on the quality of the employed machines and tools whether a larger or smaller portion of the raw materials is turned into waste in the production process."[8]

Marx concludes his discussion of the excretions of industry by noting that "it is only the experience of the combined labourer which discovers and reveals the where and how of saving, the simplest methods of applying the discoveries, and the ways to overcome the practical frictions arising from carrying out the theory—in its application to the production process."[9]

What is the significance of Marx's identification of the dynamics of the circular economy in early capitalist industry? First, it undercuts many of the claims of the novelty of circular economy. Second, it highlights the relative flexibility of capitalist accumulation where, through competitive innovations, waste becomes a productive input. It pinpoints the significant investments—by individual capitalists in their factories, and by the state in supporting scientific research—for such dynamics to occur. Finally, it identifies how while many of these innovations arise out of workers' ingenuity, the latter are not beneficiaries.

More profoundly, Marx illuminated how while industrial innovations generate circular economy-type dynamics, the continued expansion of capitalism entails ever greater resource use. Under competitive accumulation, profits are guaranteed through labour exploitation and the expropriation of nature as a "free gift" to capital.[10]

Marx's analysis of these dynamics as part and parcel of capitalist innovation and expansion cautions against placing our hopes for genuine environmental sustainability in the circular economy.

In fact, while interest in the circular economy has shot up over the last decade, so has capitalism's destruction of the natural environment through rising resource use. The global material footprint—the raw materials extracted for final consumption—rose by 113 percent, from 43 to 92 billion tonnes between 1990 and 2017, and is projected to reach 190 billion tonnes by 2060.[11] According to The Circularity Gap Report, between 2018 and 2023, the share of first-time use materials entering the world economy rose, while the share of secondary (recycled) materials entering the economy fell from 9.1 percent to 7.2 percent.[12]

Does this mean that all notions of the circular economy are either myopic (presenting it as something new when it is not) or apologetic (promoting continued capitalist competition)? Not necessarily.

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[7] ↩ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 37, 104.
[8] ↩ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 37, 104–5.
[9] ↩ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 37, 106.
[10] ↩ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 37, 732–37.
[11] ↩ UN Statistics Division, "Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production," n.d., unstats.un.org.
[12] ↩ *The Circularity Gap Report,* Circle Economy (2023), 9.

While technological development under capitalism is designed to facilitate expanded accumulation, Andrea Genovese and Mario Pansera identify an alternative, ecosocialist approach to technological innovations.[13]

Mainstream conceptions of the circular economy assume that workers' productive ingenuity becomes the private property of their employers. An ecosocialist approach places economic democracy—questions of who owns what, who does what, and who gets what—front and centre of its analysis.

The notion of convivial tools suggests that technological development should be designed by and for workers and should be orientated toward improving human social relations (through making work easier and reducing the working day), rather than facilitating competitive accumulation. It should be freely available (open source) and built to last (through eliminating planned obsolescence). It should be based on bio-extraction—systems of production designed to facilitate the reproduction of nature's reparatory cycles (such as an increasingly plant-based food system).[14]

By reducing and eventually eliminating extraction-production-consumption-disposal/waste under competitive accumulation, it would be possible to rationally plan production to meet human and our planet's environmental needs.

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[13] ↩ Andrea Genovese and Mario Pansera, "The Circular Economy at a Crossroads: Technocratic Eco-Modernism or Convivial Technology for Social Revolution?," Capitalism Nature Socialism 32, no. 2 (2021): 95–113.

[14] ↩ Benjamin Selwyn and Charis Davis, "The Case for Socialist Veganism: A Political-Economic Approach," Jus Semper, August, 2024..

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