

Chapter 4

Circular Economy: A Critical Understanding of Anti-Waste Politics

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing discourse of zero-waste and the circular economy in recent time have been underscored by key players, such as the European Commission, NGOs, INGOs, academia, and multinational companies. The discourse revolves around the fact that capitalist form of development has pushed the environment to the brink of destruction. The need of the hour is sustainable growth through the model of the circular economy. Thus, the idea of growth is being de-politicized by a post-growth narrative. This chapter wants to delve into the critical aspect of circular economy which propounds itself as a solution to capitalism driven growth. The first theme it addresses the actual materialization of circular economy whether it is actually a possible phenomenon or not. The second theme it deals with the concept of social sustainability and fulfillment of human wants. The last theme revolves around ideological dimension of post-growth, how the circular growth in the garb of post-growth ideology propels and legitimizes a more growth -driven society.

Circular Economy: A Critical Understanding of Anti-waste Politics

The idea of a perpetual growth economy is the product of modern capitalist system. The notion of a perpetual growth is there both in the tenets of economic thought as well as in economic institution¹. This idea of continual growth has been subjected to a lot of criticism both within the economic theory² as well as in the environmental sciences³. Against this scenario, there have been a will among the policymakers, academicians and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) for the sustainable economy beyond growth⁴. The negative fallout of the growth is not new; it has been well highlighted by many⁵.

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There has been a shift of interests for looking into the alternatives of the current way of organizing of our society. Nevertheless, to criticize the past and imagining an alternative future are not two separated intellectual activity- rather it is intertwined. Critique and creativity goes together- only through critical engagement with the present we can think of a different future. In this context, critical and creative thinking should try to look into the relationship between growth and sustainability and try to go beyond a commonsensical idea.

Imaginations of alternatives and critiques are still negligible⁶. In a broader academia, post-growth and de-growth have not been paid attention in management, organization and entrepreneurship studies. The scholars of post-growth and de-growth studies asserts that we need to problematize the nature of ever-growing growth. And there is a need to reclaim and re-politicize discourses, theory, and practices around sustainability and post-growth. Some have suggested research in alternative economic organizations that is not based on perpetual growth model⁷.

Adjusting Sustainability- In the World of Business.

The United Nations(U.N.) held a conference in Stockholm in 1972 on the Human Environment, which laid emphasis on the problems associated with climate change and its harmful effect on environmental degradation. During the same year, an international think tank, the Club of Rome, came out with a Report called *The Limits of Growth*, which called into questions of environmental problems related to perpetual growth economy which included depletion of natural resources and relentless pollution of the ecosystem. The report focused that the ‘Earth is finite’ with only a limited quantity of natural resources, an underlying fundamental fact that creates pertinent constraints on the overall economic growth and the ecosystem can bear. Taking into account the speed of economic development that shaped industrial development-and the related accelerated consumption of natural resources- the authors of the report stated that we would reach the threshold point within a period of 100 years. This would lead to ‘in a sudden and uncontrollable decline in population and industrial capacity’⁸

With the increased focus on climate change and environmental degradation, the United Nations promoted the publication of a report which is called *Our common future* in 1987. The report was spearheaded by the Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), guided by the former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. The report brought into focus for the first time about the concept of sustainable development⁹, defining as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’¹⁰. This focal point on reconciling economic growth with the ecological balance has remained in focus in more current endeavor to rethink sustainable developments¹¹. During the 1990s the idea of sustainable development entered into the management and organization discourse¹². Nevertheless, the concept of sustainable development remained ‘fuzzy, elusive, contestable’¹³.

Current Trend in Circular Economy and Sustainability

Popularity of circular economy is wide, cutting across policy makers, corporations and environmental groups. This idea of circular economy necessitates a fixed set of practices for transitioning towards a sustainable ecosystem. Some examples include reuse of organic waste, product design to churn out from waste; integrated heat infrastructure in industrial as well as residential designs; repair cafes in urban locality; or digital sharing platforms¹⁴. Circular economy evokes an inspiring and revolutionary concept;

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