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From circular consumers to carriers of (unsustainable) practices: socio-spatial transformations in the Circular City

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The 'Circular City' (CC) is a concept that now has notable advocates (e.g. Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017) and numerous interventions undertaken in its name (e.g. see Amsterdam Economic Board, no date; <http://circularcitieshub.com>). Invariably, challenges abound: yet, to date, Circular Economy research, more broadly, has tended towards product (micro) or policy (macro) level analysis, rather than critical engagement with meso i.e. city-level, concepts and challenges (e.g. Predeville et al., 2018). In this short piece I aim draw attention to one key aspect of much-needed meso-level engagements: that of consumption and the consumer (e.g. Hobson, 2016; Mylan et al., 2016). Specifically, I want to underscore the critical contribution that urban geographers can bring to planned or ongoing CC interventions, through essential insights into the socio-spatial embeddedness of contemporary consumption practices: a perspective currently missing from mainstream CC discussions.

To date, key governance organizations have argued that citizens' everyday material practices are "one of the key levers for enabling the transition to a circular economy" (European Environment Agency 2019: 25). In some policy documents, the consumer-led pathway to transition involves a few seemingly uncontroversial moves, which together aim to give rise to more 'circular practices' (see Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2015). For one, we can all keep consuming, but choose products and services with lesser environmental impacts (e.g. less packaging; locally sourced; streamed media content etc.). And/or we can all also consume through different means e.g. participate in the 'sharing economy', however one wishes to understand that term. While together these suggestions seem intuitively sensible, it is worth noting that claiming some practices are more circular than others remains problematic. This is down to multiple factors including the unknown incidence of e.g. direct and indirect rebound effects in shifting practices; metrics on what constitutes circularity; as well as the increasing 'circular-washing' of goods and services (as in 'greenwashing': see Correa et al., 2017).

The point here is not to suggest that, in light of these unknowns, we need better measuring and auditing trails of consumption practices: although that indeed would be insightful. It is more to argue that current conceptualisations of 'circular practices' as part of the CC fail to

appreciate how citizens' consumption patterns are inextricably situated in broader socio-spatial contexts, which fundamentally re-embed—rather than provide the means to question—current patterns of uneven and increasingly deleterious consumption.

To expand, researchers have already outlined how CE assumptions about the consumer, and how best to alter our consumption behaviours, sits on problematic intellectual foundations, with some suggesting 'practice theory' offers a fruitful replacement. This sociological body of work is itself diverse: but fundamentally underscores the relationality between the social and material. For one, Shove and Pantzar (2007) argue that to understand why we do and say particular things in particular places with particular material cultures, we must first de-centre the individual as our main locus of attention. Rather than seeing human psychology, choices, and preferences as the issues of concern—as a great deal of CE research and policy does, suggesting a particular take on 'circular practices' and how to create them (e.g. see Singh and Giacosa, 2019; Stefansdotter et al., 2016)—it is the histories, materials and competencies necessitated by the practices themselves i.e. their 'careers', which provide more insight. Thus, rather than asking 'how can we incentivize consumers to buy green or share?', we instead need to ask 'how do practices capture and retain the resources and energies of active practitioners on whom their survival depends?' (Shove and Pantzar, 2007: 155).

Such a question is highly pertinent if we think about consumption in the CC, in particular the role that urban spatialities play in that 'capture'. Take, for example, my (and others') research into potential 'users' reactions to a (proposed) new mobile phone product service system (PPS). This PPS entailed, in brief, consumers relinquishing ownership of the 'insides' of the phone, where the precious material resources are found: and dropping off their phone for a few hours, at regular intervals, to a city centre location (e.g. shopping centre) for the recycling and renewal of said 'insides'. While the results cannot be explained here at length (see Hobson et al., 2018) they align with other research, which shows the multiple challenges of encouraging consumers in taking up apparently more circular practices. That is, while our research participants were supportive of our model in theory, they expressed reservations about it in reality, and in reference to it fitting into their lives.

This may not be surprising: and seen through a 'circular practices' lens, as currently conceptualised, a valid response might be to (a) try and understand further these consumers' lives, and then (b) alter the context accordingly e.g. build-in more economic incentives; and/or

appeal to consumer's environmental or ethical concerns. But from a Shove and Pantzar perspective—and from our findings—there is an argument that this framing and response misses a crucial point. That is, that it is the connectivity provided by the mobile phone, which has become so integral to everyday practices and is mirrored in the cultural and material fabric of urban spaces, that renders swapping-out ways of consuming highly troublesome.

As a simple example, the changing 'high street' e.g. disappearance of local bank branches, means utilizing online banking services, often through one's phone, has become less of an option and more of a necessity for many. Hence our research participants' expressed definite 'data anxiety' i.e. who am I handing my phone over to, and how do I know it is safe? Such trends in turn speaks to broader reconfigurations of global economic relations, which constantly reconfigure urban spatialities to enable and encourage diverse forms of consumption (e.g. Jayne, 2005; Paterson, 2017). And as such, suggestions that consumers have considerable agency to take up (or not) circular practices, and just need to be persuaded to do so—and that urban spaces are just backdrops to fundamentally individual and cognitive consumer choices—is a highly impoverished explanation of what the consumer can and cannot do in the CC. Hence, critical urban geographers' insights and interventions have much to offer the CC agenda. Indeed, if consumption practices are a key part of any CC transition (ibid), central to interventions must be richer intellectual and empirical foundations as to how and in what ways cities—circular or otherwise—are constituted: and thus what CC transitions might look, if critical urban geographies help inform CE debates.

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