



BOOK REVIEW

Sébastien Bourdin, André Torre and Eveline van Leeuwen (Editors)

Regions, Cities and the Circular Economy: Theory and Practice

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Circular Economy (CE) has gained prominence within academic discourse, international conferences, business environments, and residential settings. It is frequently associated with environmentally respectful practices and responsible behaviours in daily life. Moreover, it possesses moral and even theological dimensions; yet, the realms of business and finance remain central to its framework. CE aspires to “ecologize the economy” and aligns with critiques of the neoliberal capitalist system, particularly through its denunciation of extractivism and the exploitation of finite, non-renewable resources.

Sébastien Bourdin, who holds the European Chair of Excellence in Circular Economy and Territories, along with André Torre, Eveline van Leeuwen, and approximately forty contributors, elucidate that a comprehensive understanding of CE and subsequent action necessitates recognizing that “*territories, cities, and regions matter*” (p. 5). These entities represent the levels at which concrete decisions are enacted—decisions that significantly impact the daily lives of residents and

businesses. CE is inherently tethered to practical realities. However, merely stating the obvious is insufficient; empirical demonstration is imperative.

The Tenets of CE

CE is frequently encapsulated by the widely recognized trilogy: *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle*—the three R’s—augmented by supplementary principles such as *Recover, Redesign, Remanufacture, Repurpose, Refurbish, Rethink* (Ghisellini and Ulgiati). Raasens and van Leeuwen revisit foundational figures and pivotal moments: Boulding (1966), the Club of Rome, the Brundtland Report, Georgescu-Roegen’s bioeconomy, Stahel, Reday-Mulvey, Pearce and Turner in 1990, and the MacArthur Foundation with its vision of a “Circular Society”—a vision informed by political ecology, the fragility of the natural environment, and advocacy for degrowth.

These “3R” principles serve as a response to the prevailing linear economic model, which is typically articulated as *Take, Make, Waste*—or, more formally, extraction, manufacturing, consumption, and disposal.

CE advocates for the prudent stewardship of resources—one of the fundamental pillars of territorial development—aiming to protect and regenerate these resources in accordance with the principles of agro-ecology and sustainable agriculture. It encourages the utilization of abundant and renewable “natural” resources, often perceived as nearly free, while simultaneously urging a reduction in waste. However, CE does not overlook the reality of trade-offs that arise between competing objectives. It integrates sub-systems such as industrial and territorial ecology (ITE), industrial symbiosis, eco-design, the functional economy, and metabolic analysis. CE can be perceived as an umbrella concept (Hassain et al., 2024), as noted in the book, encompassing a variety of interpretations and operational approaches. It may be described as both a universe composed of multiple galaxies—ecological, moral, theological, and political—and a versatile tool, akin to a Swiss army knife, with diverse ambitions and applications. The butterfly diagram and the Kalundborg symbiosis are widely recognized as emblematic symbols.

"The Cowboy and the Astronaut": CE is Spatially Anchored

This well-known expression by Boulding (partially repurposed here) serves to justify the rationale behind this book: territories are indispensable for comprehending Circular Economy (CE), facilitating its implementation, and engaging stakeholders. CE should not be perceived as an abstract concept. Rather, it employs methodologies from regional science, such as Marshallian externalities,

urbanization and localization economies, spatial econometrics, attraction models, and entropy-maximizing models.

Bourdin, Torre, and van Leeuwen emphasize the significance of regions, cities, and territories within the context of CE, asserting that its implementation must be tailored to specific spatial contexts and pertinent territorial scales. Furthermore, CE has the potential to enhance a sense of belonging through geographical and civic proximity. Cities, as discussed by Lacombe and Rajaonson, play a crucial role in catalyzing, promoting, and facilitating CE; however, they must also be vigilant to avoid "local traps." CE is operationalized and organized at various scales, including neighborhoods, industrial zones, or university campuses, yet interactions across differing scales can give rise to complex systems characterized by overlapping rules and dependencies related to global trade. As highlighted by van Leeuwen and Meinardi in their examination of food supply chains within Dutch regions: "*Think big and think diverse*"—though the resurgence of trade wars may reinforce the conventional linear model.

Circular Economy in Transition

The 3R framework and the *Take-Make-Waste* model, while practical, are often oversimplified representations: transforming a system or society cannot be accomplished through mere magic! CE constitutes a dynamic process embedded within broader ecological, energy, economic, and even cognitive transitions. As the editors articulate, CE aspires to foster "*a new form of prosperity that not only respects the ecological limits of our planet but also perceives them as pathways for progress and economic resilience*" (p. 3). Nevertheless, CE must consider *path dependency*. The tasks of decarbonizing and rehabilitating polluted (industrial, urban, or agricultural) spaces in the context of deindustrialization necessitate a reconsideration of governance models alongside meticulous management of employment impacts. Progress should be pursued through incremental advancements rather than grand ambitions. It is also crucial to recognize that well-intentioned efforts do not inevitably result in a departure from the established norms of business and *finance*—"we're here to make money at the end of the day."

Achievements require time and must navigate various obstacles—such as regulatory constraints—but they also present opportunities related to financing and niche markets. Numerous territories assert their status as pioneering advocates of CE—whether Glasgow, Victoriaville, Guimarães, Port-Jérôme, or Dunkirk. While many CE initiatives operate within timelines aiming for 2030 or 2050, substantial progress is also accomplished through "everyday common sense": the principles of circularity and civility ought to harmonize—in our own streets, oceans, and beaches.

Further elaboration could be beneficial regarding industrial and territorial ecology, industrial symbioses, and metabolic approaches that are context-specific and vary across different regions and cities. It is important to note that recycling has its limitations—particularly in military or medical contexts.

This book, with its emphasis on territorial dimensions, offers a more comprehensive, nuanced, and sophisticated theoretical framework for the concept of Circular Economy (CE)—one that transcends the simplistic condemnation of the linear model encapsulated in the phrase *Take, Make, Waste*. The enduring resilience of the linear model may indeed merit the development of a future volume.