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Towards a just and sustainable circularity: An ecological economics and political ecology approach to the circular economy

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SECCIÓN ARTÍCULOS

Towards a just and sustainable circularity: An ecological economics and political ecology approach to the circular economy

Abstract: Since the beginning of the 21st century, the circular economy has gained increasing importance on the European political agenda. Currently, it is presented as an ideal economic solution to address the ecological crisis and promote social well-being. However, in recent years, numerous critical voices have emerged from fields such as ecological economics and political ecology. In this article, I review the main criticisms associated with the idea of a circular economy based on the premise of green growth. Subsequently, I present some theoretical and practical suggestions to transition towards a circularity compatible with fair and sustainable economic systems. The thesis I defend here is that the notion of a circular economy has opened a breach in the neoliberal capitalist framework that can favour the eco-social transition. For this, it is essential to dissociate circularity from the social construct of prioritising economic growth over other social and environmental issues. Only by the emergence of new logic and institutions outside the capitalist framework will it be possible to design a fair and truly sustainable circularity.

Key words: environmental justice; postgrowth; degrowth; strong sustainability; environmental economics

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IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. La agenda europea de economía circular omite las enseñanzas de más de cinco décadas de campos como la economía ecológica y la ecología política2. Si la transición hacia la economía circular no se problematiza adecuadamente, ésta puede incrementar la presión ambiental, las desigualdades sociales y favorecer la concentración de poder3. La discusión sobre la economía circular abarca elementos que se escapan del ámbito de la ciencia económica, incluyendo cuestiones de la biología y la ecología, la política e incluso la filosofía4. Únicamente a partir de la emergencia de nuevas lógicas e instituciones fuera del marco capitalista será posible diseñar una circularidad adaptada a los tiempos y necesidades actuales | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The European circular economy agenda omits the lessons of more than five decades from fields such as ecological economics and political ecology2. If the transition to the circular economy is not adequately addressed, it may increase environmental pressures, social inequalities and favor the concentration of power.3. The discussion about circular economy encompasses elements outside the realm of economic science, including questions of biology and ecology, politics and even philosophy. accompanying citizen initiatives show interest in fostering a culture of hospitality.4. Only through the emergence of new logics and institutions outside the capitalist framework will it be possible to design a circularity adapted to current times and needs. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. L'agenda europea d'economia circular omet els ensenyaments de més de cinc dècades de camps com l'economia ecològica i l'ecologia política.2. Si la transició cap a l'economia circular no es problematiza adequadament, aquesta pot incrementar la pressió ambiental, les desigualtats socials i afavorir la concentració de poder.3. La discussió sobre l'economia circular abasta elements que s'escapen de l'àmbit de la ciència econòmica, incloent-hi qüestions de la biologia i l'ecologia, la política i fins i tot la filosofia.4. Únicament, a partir de l'emergència de noves lògiques i institucions fora del marc capitalista, serà possible dissenyar una circularitat adaptada als temps i necessitats actuals. |
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT¹

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the circular economy has gained increasing importance on the European policy agenda. It is now being offered as an ideal solution to tackle the ecological crisis and promote social welfare. The circular economy is presented as an optimal solution to the need to green economic growth, an idea that is intrinsically linked to the capitalist system. The rise of the circular economy is essentially because the idea fits squarely within the neoliberal framework if it is to accept the material relationship of economic systems to their environment, and also because it allows for continuity in the growth agenda. The lack of negativity surrounding the concept hides, however, multiple social and environmental problems.

Initially, I review the main criticisms associated with the idea of a circular economy based on the premise of green growth. On the one hand, the biophysical criticisms relate to the impossibility of implementing totally closed economic systems, and also to the ability of such systems to reduce their environmental impact through the green growth strategy. On the other hand, the socio-political critique focuses on the failure to address the fact that there are winners and losers in the transition to the circular economy, and that a very specific model of society is being reinforced. Ultimately, the reduction of the circular economy to the neoliberal capitalist space is limiting the transition towards fairer and more sustainable production and consumption systems.

I then present some theoretical and practical suggestions for moving towards a circularity that is compatible with just and sustainable economic systems. Broadly speaking, the thesis I defend here is that the notion of circular economy has opened a breach in the neoliberal capitalist framework, pointing to the need to connect economic systems to the environmental and social context in which they develop. The discussion of monetary issues has allowed social and political life to be reduced to equations and models of economic science for a long time, but discussing material and energy issues requires moving the discussion to spheres outside such models. Regardless of the effort of current economic science to capture this question, it is clear that this is an issue that goes beyond the boundaries of the discipline. The discussion of the circular economy inexorably encompasses elements from the realms of biology and ecology, politics and even philosophy.

In short, fair and sustainable circularity should be based on the premise that the economy is part of a larger system in which people and nature coexist. Regardless of the degree of circularity of the economy, the (re)production of societies requires a constant flow of matter and energy. Moreover, economic processes take place in social contexts that need to be considered in decision-making. Circularity should serve not only to adjust economic systems to natural limits, but also to increase the well-being of societies. Issues such as recycling, reuse, repair or remanufacturing go far beyond the purely technological. How to operationalise efforts to implement circularities is a social and political question, and therefore needs to be addressed as such. The article also presents examples related to food sovereignty and energy production.

¹ Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

The article concludes that in order to move towards a fair and sustainable circularity, it is essential to detach this circularity from the social construction of putting economic growth before other social and environmental issues. Only through the emergence of new logics and institutions outside the capitalist framework will it be possible to design a circularity adapted to current times and needs.