

SUSTAINABILITY

What's the Difference Between a Circle and Loophole?

by Jeff Voss



Can the circular economy correct for the fundamental inequities that have contributed to environmental degradation in the first place?

✔ **INSIGHT** | NOTE 23 Mar 2018

Framing Practices

Is the Circular Economy (CE) just one big loophole? If, as proponents of the Circular Economy argue, the transition from the current linear models of “take-make-waste” to an upcycled, self-sustaining Circular Economy requires not just logistical shifts but ideological ones, why do we continue to frame this issue using existing business

terms? Many of the arguments for the Circular Economy are made in the name of gaining “new revenue streams,” “increasing efficiency/productivity,” and of turning “waste into wealth.” These are not necessarily ignoble efforts in themselves, but they belie just how totalizing capitalist realism continues to be in the neoliberal west, and how existing forces and structures still shape our conception of what is possible.

As Naomi Klein demonstrates in her paradigm-redefining *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, throughout history and to the present day, a very small privileged class has had the say in the intentional destruction of our planet in the name of profits and uninhibited growth. Klein has been passionately arguing for years that humanity’s effort to fight climate change cannot be done within our current systems. On this much, proponents of the CE concur. Where the Circular Economists are much more silent is just how drastic this inevitable change must be. How can we possibly transition to a Circular Economy without also undoing the hierarchical and exploitative nature of not just our economies, but our entire culture?

How can we ensure that our inevitable transition to a more Circular Economy is not just a loophole within capitalism that perpetuates the same inequalities and oppressions as before—as now? These are, as of now, not the explicit goals of proponents of the CE, but they should be. While much of the literature around the CE acknowledge and center around the environmental crisis, most of it is notably silent on other related injustices that are intimately and extensively connected with fighting climate change. As Klein and others illustrate, the environmental crisis, institutional racism, misogyny, homophobia (along with countless other oppressions) are all interconnected within our neoliberal globe in complex ways. A local example could be to ask why the Chevron refinery is in Richmond and not Marin? These complex issues cannot be solved by the displacement of one economy for another, but by demanding a holistic transformation from systems of hierarchy to those of cooperation and empowerment.

I shop, therefore I am?

Within late capitalism, we are encouraged to self-identify as consumers. We are told that we have “buying power.” But what does this power look like? Can the things we buy within a broken system effectively be used to transgress that very system? Are we to accept these means as the best way to work the traps in which we find ourselves enmeshed?

Philosopher Campbell Jones eloquently articulates this bind in his piece “The Subject Supposed to Recycle.” He describes how consumer choices are highly dubious in their efficacy to change the business practices and philosophies of companies. Even as we attempt to make an impact through consumer choices, we must acknowledge the fact that these strategies of buying the “greenest” or most sustainable products—while significant—do still contribute to a profitable subset within capitalism—the so called “Green Economy”—a wing that has been fairly easily absorbed into the current exploitative system. The power and scope of our consumer choices are extremely limited. Not eating meat for a year saves over 162,486 gallons of water and literal tons of carbon emissions, but it ultimately does very little to address the brutal toll on the environment and domestic animals imposed by the agriculture industry. In this example, despite decades of ample evidence and moral arguments against factory farming practices, the meat and dairy industry, while barely altering their practices and philosophies from within, have legally and militantly increased their attempts to prevent any changes to their cruel factory farm practices. While not buying meat or exclusively buying sustainably caught seafood is a start, as Klein makes clear, “No is not enough.”

As Dara O’Rourke and Robert Strand point out in their study of outdoor retailer **Patagonia**, sustainable business practices can be both profitable and relatively progressive. However, as they note, the impact of Patagonia’s sustainable practices will be very limited if only Patagonia is implementing them. It’s going to take widespread cooperation from the leadership of many industry giants like Nike, The North Face, Apple, Amazon, etc. to initiate change from within the incumbent paradigm, in conjunction with citizens working to politically restructure the globe. A vague group in part led by former NYC mayor Michael Bloomberg and “non-national actors” have banded together to submit a plan to the UN to agree to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in line with the Paris Climate Accords in response to President Trump’s decision to pull the U.S. out of the agreement. While this is dismaying in one sense, in that it potentially furthers the neoliberal dream of private groups taking over the powers usually accorded to states as stewards of the earth and its citizens, it also contains the possibility of creating and sustaining alternative ways of living

outside of the control of central powers. But again, if these players — which include the cities, universities, and multinational corporations, all of whom have a great deal of vested interest in maintaining the current capitalist system — continue to work within the existing paradigms and focus on climate change while neglecting the fabric of other oppressions (of which climate change is but one thread), their attempts to reduce carbon emissions will be for naught.

Wealth redistribution: the ultimate circle

We have to change our models of reality as we change our models of ourselves, both conceptually and literally. We cannot have empowered individuals under capitalism. Under capitalism our choices are edged further and further towards foreclosure; they exist within a very limited and highly orchestrated spectrum of power. Additionally, I know of no circles where one percent of the circle gets all the say and sway over the other 99% of the circle. Just eight men own more wealth than over half of the world. What kind of a circle is that? A dissolution of vertiginous management and leadership practices in an effort toward truly democratic worker-owned cooperatives is an essential element of the CE. Though the literature on the Circular Economy is reticent about this elephant in the room, the transition must be a thorough, holistic one. The dismantling of hierarchical leadership structures, prior profit motives, and metastasized growth in the name of shareholder value must be part of the new economies of the world, along with a concentrated effort to forsake wealth in the effort of making life better for all. We cannot allow capitalism to subsume the Circular Economy because it can and it will. In order to create a better future we must create a better system in harmony with each other and the earth.



Jeff Voss [Follow](#)

Jeff Voss is a human person living in Berkeley, California. He is currently working on a book exploring the connections between comedy and contemporary masculinity.