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Towards a Circular Society: Rethinking the Circular Economy from a Degrowth Perspective

Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

Most of today's circular economy (CE) discourses are based on eco-modernist visions and focus on technocratic and depoliticised processes. Moreover, the role of citizens in the CE remains underdeveloped, relegating them to passive consumers. In response to these shortcomings, this thesis proposes an alternative framework called the 'circular society' (CS), which aims for a more inclusive socio-ecological transformation. The CS seeks to disrupt existing power dynamics, norms, and practices, while re-embedding the economy within the social and ecological spheres. It advocates principles such as conviviality, sharing and care, in line with degrowth theory. As this thesis shows, the implementation of a CS requires the democratisation of economic and political arenas, an expansion of participation opportunities, and increased openness and transparency. Citizens, businesses, and the state play active roles in a CS, with citizens engaging in non-commodified activities and driving political change, businesses prioritising community building and socio-environmental performance, and governments providing systemic support and market governance structures.

ABBREVIATIONS

CE	Circular Economy
CS	Circular Society
DIY	Do-It-Yourself
DPP	Digital product passport
EMF	Ellen MacArthur Foundation
EU	European Union
GHG	Greenhouse gas
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
PPS	Product service system
R&D	Research & development
RLES	Resource life-extending strategies

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"An economic system which can only expand or expire must be false to all that is human."

– Edward Abbey, author (1927–1989)

I Introduction

Over the past few decades, the modern industrial economy, characterised by its linear economic model, has come under increasing scrutiny. For many, it has become clear that "[s]ustained economic growth based on a linear production model is not feasible [on] a planet with finite resources and a limited capacity to absorb wastes" (Suárez-Eiroa et al., 2019, p. 953). While the negative impacts of economic growth on natural resources and environmental degradation have been known since the 1960s (Meadows et al., 1972), little has been done to address these issues effectively. On the contrary, global environmental challenges have steadily increased in recent years. According to Fraser et al. (2023), the extraction and processing of natural resources contributes to about 70% of today's global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Moreover, the extraction and use of materials is closely linked to other forms of environmental damage, such as global biodiversity loss or water stress (Steinmann et al., 2017). The linearity of production and consumption processes has also led to a sharp increase in global waste generation (Sharma & Jain, 2020). In short, the linear economic model, with its critical dependence on natural resources, has thrown the global environmental system out of balance. As Fraser et al. (2023, p. 12) write, "we are now transgressing five of nine planetary boundaries that are crucial to planetary health: climate change, biodiversity loss, land system change, chemical pollution, and cycles of nitrogen and phosphorus." Another planetary boundary, ocean acidification, is also dangerously close to its tipping point. At current rates, humanity is using the Earth's resources 1.8 times faster than they can be regenerated naturally. In other words, it would take almost two planets to sustain today's global consumption patterns (Earth Overshoot Day, n.d.).

Against this background, the concept of a circular economy (CE) has received considerable attention as a possible panacea that would allow economic growth to be decoupled from its environmental impacts (Hofmann, 2022). While its conceptual underpinnings date back to the 1960s, it was not until the early 2010s that the term really came to the fore in the public and political discourse (Ekins et al., 2019). In recent years, the CE concept has been increasingly integrated into business strategies and national legislation, particularly in Europe and China (Suárez-Eiroa et al., 2019). While there is still no universally accepted definition, CE is often described as an 'umbrella term' that encompasses various ideas related to resource and waste management (Blomsma and Brennan, 2017). Some of its core defining elements include the restorative use of resources (Geisendorf & Pietrulla, 2018), resource efficiency (Alhawari et al., 2021), and the idea of a closed loop of material, energy, and waste flows

(Wysokińska, 2016). However, while the CE arguably offers a welcome glimmer of hope that a balance between environmental, social, and economic goals can still be achieved, it faces several challenges and limitations (Skene, 2018). Most importantly, it has been pointed out that the CE concept is virtually silent on its social implications (Hobson & Lynch, 2016; Sauvé et al., 2016). As Calisto Friant et al. (2023, p. 2) underline, mainstream CE propositions "do not address crucial sustainability implications of CE, such as how the benefits and costs of a CE transition are distributed, who controls CE technologies and patents, who decides on the shape, form, and policies for a CE transition, and what are the overall social and environmental impacts of CE proposals." Moreover, critics argue that most CE approaches are based on an eco-modernist¹ logic and portray the CE as a technocratic and depoliticised business opportunity (Bradley & Persson, 2022). Consequently, it has been argued that the mainstream CE discourse has "created and entrenched various forms of 'green accumulation' [...], which has done little to transform prevailing economic systems, norms, and practices" (Hobson, 2020, p. 163).

Addressing the need for a more thorough examination of the social impacts of a CE, this master's thesis discusses the idea of a circular society (CS). The CS concept has emerged relatively recently and offers "an alternative framing [of the CE] that is going beyond growth, technology and market-based solutions" (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021, p. 1). More specifically, this thesis analyses the CE concept from a degrowth perspective and discusses how it can be organised along a new set of principles such as autonomy, justice, solidarity, democracy, conviviality, sharing, and care (Akbulut, 2021; Calisto Friant et al., 2023). It argues that because current CE approaches are based on a 'green growth' perspective, they fail to disrupt the socio-economic status quo in terms of power, norms, and politics (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Hofmann, 2022). This paper therefore calls for a reorganisation of current forms of consumption and production as well as the establishment of a new social model that puts citizens and local communities at its centre. Against this background, I aim to contribute to the emerging debate on CS by analysing the scope and conceptual understanding of the concept. The guiding research questions of this master's thesis are the following:

What are the key elements of a circular society? What role do citizens, businesses, and the state play in a circular society?

¹ According to Grunwald (2018, p. 1855), "positions referred to as "eco-modernist" [...] strongly refer to market forces and argue that it is in principle possible to reconcile economic growth and the needs to protect a functioning ecosphere."

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Chapter II presents a comprehensive literature review. First, I review the historical background of the CE concept and discuss its definitions and core principles, before addressing some of the main critiques and limitations. Secondly, I discuss the CE from a consumption perspective, where I highlight the limited engagement with the role of citizens in current CE approaches. In the last part of the literature review, I introduce the idea of a CS and present some of the scarce literature on the subject. Based on the gaps identified in the literature review, Chapter III discusses the scope of this research paper and presents the two guiding research questions. In Chapter IV, I discuss the theoretical framework of this thesis before describing the methodology in Chapter V. Chapter VI then presents the results of my analysis and provides a detailed discussion of the findings. Finally, I conclude the thesis in Chapter VII by summarising the findings of my research and discussing possible future research avenues.

II Literature Review

2.1 What is the 'Circular Economy'?

2.1.1 Historical Background

While the exact origin of the term 'circular economy' itself is debated, its theoretical and conceptual foundations are generally traced back to the beginnings of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Blomsma & Brennan, 2017; Murray et al., 2017). According to many scholars, Kenneth Boulding has been one of the most important intellectual pioneers of the CE concept (Ekins et al., 2019; Greyson, 2007). In a paper published in 1966, Boulding introduced the idea of closed systems and contrasted them to what is now called the 'take-make-dispose' linear economy (Ekins et al., 2019; Rizos et al., 2017). In his paper, Boulding also introduced his now famous distinction between 'cowboy' and 'spaceship' economies. While the former are associated with "the illimitable plains and also associated with reckless, exploitative, romantic, and violent behaviour, which is characteristic of open societies", he argues that the latter recognise that "the earth has become a single spaceship, without unlimited reservoirs of anything, either for extraction or for pollution, and in which, therefore, man must find his place in a cyclical ecological system which is capable of continuous reproduction of material form even though it cannot escape having inputs of energy" (Boulding, 1966 in Ekins et al., 2019, p. 5). Based on these considerations, Boulding argued that a 'spaceship' economy must be primarily concerned with "stock maintenance", by reproducing the finite amount of resource inputs and recycling waste products, thus creating a 'closed' economy that aims to preserve the overall capital supply (Rizos et al., 2017).

Boulding's ideas later formed the basis of many scientific discussions about the finite resource stock of our planet and society's role in managing and exploiting it. Most prominently, the 'Limits to Growth' report, published in 1972 by a group of researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), underlined that unlimited economic growth on a finite planet is unsustainable and will lead to the depletion of natural resources, pollution, and environmental degradation (Meadows et al., 1972). Based on a computer simulation, the researchers argued that "an unreformed cowboy economy was headed for 'overshoot and collapse' within a century" (Ekins et al., 2019, p. 6). The report sparked a global conversation about the need for new forms of economic development, which ultimately led to the rise of the 'sustainable development' paradigm in the late 1980s (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). At the same time, new debates on product-life extensions and recycling

entered the scientific arena (Frosch & Gallopoulos, 1989; Stahel and Reday-Mulvey, 1981). Stahel (1982), for instance, argued that "the extension of the use-life of goods [constitutes] a sensible point at which to start a gradual transition towards a sustainable society in which progress is made consistent with the world's finite resource base" (Stahel, 1982 in Ekins et al., 2019, p. 6). Stahel also introduced what he called a "spiral-loop system that minimises matter, energy-flow and environmental deterioration without restricting economic growth or social and technical progress [...] through reuse (loop 1), repair (loop 2), reconditioning (loop 3) and recycling (loop 4)" (Stahel, 1982 in Ekins et al., 2019, p. 6).

While these discussions contributed to early understandings of the CE, it was not until a decade later that the concept was clearly defined and integrated into economic theory (Ekins et al., 2019). According to Rizos et al. (2017), Pearce & Turner (1990) used the term for the first time in an economic model. In their book, the authors contrast (circular) natural systems with (linear) economic systems and emphasise the importance of the laws of thermodynamics (an idea that was already discussed by Boulding in 1966). As they write: "Boulding's essay was pointing to the need to contemplate Earth as a closed economic system: one in which the economy and environment are not characterised by linear interlinkages, but by a circular relationship. Everything is an input into everything else" (Pearce and Turner, 1990, p. 37 in Ekins et al., 2019, p. 7, original emphasis). However, Pearce & Turner's work did go mostly unnoticed. In fact, between 1990 and 2010 there was hardly any conceptual development of the CE and the idea gradually faded from the scientific discourse (Ekins et al., 2019). This changed with the establishment of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF) in 2010. In 2013, the EMF produced three publications entitled 'Towards the Circular Economy', which laid the foundations for the success of the concept today. Various publications followed, allowing the concept to gain considerable attention. By 2015, the CE was finally entering the mainstream, as both businesses and governments - especially in the European Union (EU) and China started to take up the concept (Ekins et al., 2019). Today, CE is one of the most discussed terms among environmental economic scholars and increasingly integrated into business strategies and national legislations (Geisendorf & Pietrulla, 2018). Despite this success, however, the exact definition of the concept is still under debate, as I will show in the next section.

2.1.2 Definition and Conceptualisation

While the growing attention to the CE has allowed it to spread rapidly, it has also blurred the concept, as it has been taken up by a variety of different actors (Kirchherr et al., 2017). Indeed, it has been pointed out by various researchers that there is no commonly accepted

definition of the CE (Alhawari et al., 2021; Kirchherr et al., 2017; Lieder & Rashid, 2016; Yuan et al., 2008). In light of this conceptual uncertainty, this section discusses some of the most prominent CE definitions with the aim of outlining the key elements of how a CE is defined.

As Geisendorf & Pietrulla (2018, p. 771) underline, scholars agree on the fact "that the CE stands in contrast to the linear economy based on a 'take-make-dispose' sequence." They further argue that the "core defining element [of a CE] is the 'restorative use' of resources" (Geisendorf & Pietrulla, 2018, p. 771). Other researchers add to this by highlighting the need for material or resource efficiency (Alhawari et al., 2021; Ekins et al., 2019). The idea of a closed loop of material, energy and waste flows is also central to most CE definitions (Geng & Doberstein, 2008; Scheel, 2016). According to Wysokińska (2016, p. 1), for example, a CE refers to a "closed-loop economy [that] does not generate excessive waste and whereby any waste becomes a resource." A similar definition can be found in the 'EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy' which states that in a CE "the value of products and materials is maintained for as long as possible; waste and resource use are minimised, and resources are kept within the economy when a product has reached the end of its life, to be used again and again to create further value" (European Commission, 2015).

In an attempt to connect some of these points, Blomsma and Brennan (2017) describe the CE as an 'umbrella concept' that encompasses a range of ideas related to resource and waste management. In their view, a CE is mainly concerned with the extension of "the productive life of resources as a means to create value and reduce value destruction" (Blomsma and Brennan, 2017, p. 609). This point is also discussed by Camacho-Otero et al. (2018, p. 2) who argue that a CE "aims at decoupling value creation from waste generation and resource use by radically transforming production and consumption systems." However, as Ghisellini et al. (2016, p. 2) underline, the CE should not be misinterpreted as merely "an approach to more appropriate waste management." Instead, the authors argue, the CE should be seen as a new business model that has the potential to achieve "more sustainable development and a harmonious society" (Ghisellini et al., 2016, p. 2). This systemic approach has also been taken up by other scholars, such as Birat (2015). Ghisellini et al. (2016, p. 12) further argue that a "CE promotes a more appropriate and environmentally sound use of resources" which ultimately leads to "improved wellbeing and evident impacts on equity within and among generations in terms of both resource use and access." It should be noted that this description

makes a clear link to the sustainable development paradigm and its argument for inter- and intra-generational equity² (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

In light of the plethora of different definitions and conceptual understandings, Kirchherr et al. (2017) analysed a total of 114 CE research papers in order to provide more clarity regarding the current understandings of the CE concept. Based on their systematic assessment, Kirchherr et al. (2017, pp. 224–225) propose the following definition:

"A circular economy describes an economic system that is based on business models which replace the 'end-of-life' concept with reducing, alternatively reusing, recycling and recovering materials in production/distribution and consumption processes, thus operating at the micro level (products, companies, consumers), meso level (eco-industrial parks) and macro level (city, region, nation and beyond), with the aim to accomplish sustainable development, which implies creating environmental quality, economic prosperity and social equity, to the benefit of current and future generations."

Besides the reference to extending the productive life of resources, the authors also introduce the idea that the CE operates at different scales, i.e., at the micro, meso, and macro level. In addition, they explicitly mention the sustainable development paradigm and argue that the main objective of a CE is to create a balance between environmental protection, economic growth, as well as inter- and intragenerational social equity. For the purpose of this paper, I base my conceptual understanding of CE on Kirchherr et al.'s definition. In the next section, I will discuss the core principles of a CE.

2.1.3 Circularity Strategies and Core Principles

Similar to the variety of CE definitions, there are a number of different strategies for achieving a CE. The most common set of principles are the so-called '3Rs' (reduce, reuse, and recycle), which are discussed by authors such as Ghisellini et al. (2016), Haas et al., (2015), or Yuan et al. (2008). It is to note that the number of Rs has multiplied over time (Ekins et al., 2019). Potting et al. (2017), for example, identified a total of 9Rs, which they ranked according to their level of circularity (Figure 1).

² Inter-generational equity refers to fairness and justice in the distribution of resources and benefits *between* different generations, ensuring that present actions do not compromise the well-being and opportunities of future generations. Intra-generational equity, on the other hand, focuses on fairness and justice *within* a single generation, aiming to address disparities and ensure that resources and benefits are distributed equitably among individuals within the same generation (IPBES, 2018).



Figure 1. Circularity strategies within the production chain, in order of priority.

Source: Potting et al. (2017, p. 5).

As mentioned previously, Blomsma and Brennan (2017) focus primarily on CE strategies that seek to extend the life of resources. In this regard, the authors coined the term 'resource life-extending strategies' (RLESs), which include activities such as "reuse, recycling, remanufacturing, servitization, repair, waste-to-energy, product longevity approaches, and the cascading of substances (i.e., the transformation of materials through various use phases)" (Blomsma and Brennan, 2017, p. 606). Another noteworthy publication is an OECD working paper from 2018 which argued that a CE is characterised by the following key features: increased product repair and remanufacture, increased material recycling, more robust long-lived products through design, increased produce reuse and repair, increased material productivity, improved asset utilisation, and modified consumer behaviour. According to the authors, these strategies ultimately lead to a decreased demand for new goods (and virgin materials), the substitution of secondary raw materials in production, an expanded secondary

sector, more durable and repairable products, and expanded sharing and service economies (McCarthy et al., 2018).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these strategies in greater detail, it is important to note that they all aim to reform the current economic system (Kirchherr et al., 2017). As Ekins et al. (2019, p. 17) point out, this "will require new business models [...] that are part of a whole-system perspective on resource use, and incorporate closed supply chains, regenerative design, and reverse logistics that increase the life of products, thereby maintaining for a longer period the value in their materials and the overall value derived from them, so that fewer materials end up as wastes." As some have argued, such disruptive business models could potentially also lead to new ways of thinking about economic growth (Esposito et al., 2017). In this sense, the CE entails a shift of paradigm, requiring significant changes in the way that society legislates, produces, and consumes (Prieto-Sandoval et al., 2018). At the same time, several scholars point out that "the literature on the circular economy is generally premised on reforming the current capitalist model of continued economic growth rather than on building alternative forms of economies" (Bradley & Persson, 2022, p. 1323; see also Ghisellini et al., 2016; Fratini et al., 2019; or Schulz et al., 2019). Bradley & Persson (2022, p. 1323) thus contrast CE models that entail a "fundamental transformation of society" with those that are solely a "continuation of eco-modernist logics [...]." As I will show in the next section, the latter still dominate today, which is ultimately why the social impacts of the CE have not yet been properly addressed.

2.1.4 Critiques and Limitations

Over the past years, the CE model has faced an increasing number of criticisms that underlined some central shortcomings and limitations of the concept. In the following, I present the main theoretical, practical, and political critiques that have been raised in recent scientific literature. Firstly, as pointed out earlier, critics highlight the fact the CE lacks a commonly accepted definition and is often confused with similar concepts (Alhawari et al., 2021; Kirchherr et al., 2017). For example, Geisendorf & Pietrulla (2018) identified a variety of concepts with a circular approach, including the blue economy, cradle-to-cradle, closed-loop supply chains, industrial ecology, reverse logistics, low waste production, or biomimicry. They point out that "[b]ecause of the abundance of related terms, some scholars even claim that the CE stands on 'shaky ground'" (Geisendorf & Pietrulla, 2018, p. 772). Indeed, this conceptual fragmentation can be problematic, as it makes it difficult to know what the CE is actually about and has led some scholars to call it as an "essentially contested concept" (Calisto Friant et al., 2023, p. 2).

Another important criticism concerns the lack of clarity in the implementation of the concept. As Corvellec et al. (2022, p. 424) point out, the CE "circulates widely as an idea and ideal, with stakeholders, scales, and different sectors identified; however, the "practicalities" [....] and actual enactments are limited and fragile." It is true that there are various barriers that hamper the implementation of a CE at the levels of policies, organisations, and individual consumers. For instance, de Jesus & Mendonça (2018, p. 78) cite a number of different barriers to circular business model developments, including "technical barriers such as an inappropriate technology, or lack of technical support and training; economic barriers such as capital requirements, high initial costs, or uncertain return and profit; institutional and regulatory barriers such as a lack of a conducive legal system, or a deficient institutional framework; and social and cultural barriers such as a rigidity of consumer behaviour and businesses routines." It has therefore been pointed out that linear technologies continue to dominate the market despite their inefficiency (Korhonen et al., 2018), and that it remains challenging to scale up circular innovations (Brandão et al., 2020).

Thirdly, some critics question the contributions of the CE to environmental sustainability. For example, Hart & Pomponi (2021, p. 127) argue that while "some CE initiatives may lead to the decoupling of economic growth from resource extraction, this does not necessarily equate to reducing the rate of extraction." Zink & Geyer (2017) even talk of a 'circular economy rebound' effect. Drawing parallels to the issue of energy efficiency rebound, the authors argue that the "[CE] rebound occurs when circular economy activities, which have lower per-unit-production impacts, also cause increased levels of production, reducing their benefit" (Zink & Geyer, 2017, p. 593). Similar concerns are also shared by other researchers. Korhonen et al. (2018), for instance, have pointed to the fact that the potential short- and long-term environmental impacts of CE projects remain highly uncertain. Given these uncertainties, Corvellec et al. (2022, p. 426) have argued that "the only difference between a linear and a circular economy is that the negative environmental impact will take longer to occur in a circular economy."

While the environmental impacts of the CE have yet to be better understood, an increasing number of scholars also point to the fact that the CE is virtually silent on the social dimension (Blomsma & Brennan, 2017; Hobson & Lynch, 2016; Sauvé et al., 2016). As Murray et al. (2017, p. 376) put it: "It is unclear how the concept of the Circular Economy will lead to greater social equality, in terms of inter- and intra-generational equity, gender, racial

and religious equality and other diversity, financial equality, or in terms of equality of social opportunity." Indeed, mainstream visions of CE – including those of the EMF or the European Commission - are based on an 'eco-modernist logic' that describes CE as a technocratic and depoliticised process (Bradley & Persson, 2022; Niskanen et al., 2020). This becomes particularly evident when considering the role of citizens (generally referred to as 'users' or 'consumers')³ in mainstream CE discourses. As various scholars point out, the role of citizens in the CE is largely underdeveloped in both academic literature and policy-making (Hobson & Lynch, 2016; Kirchherr et al., 2017). Bauwens et al. (2020) have called this phenomenon 'circular modernism', where "large corporations take centre stage, and citizens are placed in the peripheral role of embracing circular practices" (Bradley & Persson, 2022, p. 1323). Given the neglect of the role of the citizen, some have questioned if CE approaches can truly change business-as-usual approaches and create economies that are able to operate within the planetary boundaries⁴ (Ghisellini et al., 2016; Hobson & Lynch 2016; Fratini et al., 2019; Schulz et al., 2019). Additionally, mainstream CE visions assume "that consumers would be responsible or rational enablers of this system overlooking the vast literature that discredits such a 'rational consumer' approach" (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020, p. 74). Consequentially, Camacho-Otero et al. (2020, p. 74) argue that if the CE "is to become reality or normality, further examination of its implications for consumption and consumers is required." Against this background, the following chapter takes a closer look at the consumption side and discusses the role of citizens in the CE.

2.2 The Circular Economy from a Consumption Perspective

As discussed in the previous chapter, implementing a CE requires significant changes in both production and consumption systems (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018). However, most of the literature related to the CE only focuses on the production side, analysing circular business models (Rizos et al., 2017), delving into methods for creating circular value propositions (Lewandowski, 2016), or discussing the advantages of implementing such models (EMF, 2013). Consequently, the consumption side of the CE remains underdeveloped in the current

³ The terms 'consumer', 'user' and 'citizen' are used interchangeably in this thesis. However, it should be noted that the term 'citizen' emphasises the political role of individuals, whereas the terms 'consumer' and 'user' have a more passive connotation. Later in this thesis I will also introduce the term 'citizen-consumer' to describe the hybrid role that people have as consumers, citizens, and activists.

⁴ The term 'planetary boundaries' refers to a concept introduced by scientists to define and understand the limits within which human activities can operate without causing irreversible harm to the Earth's ecosystems. It identifies a set of critical environmental thresholds or boundaries that, if crossed, could trigger abrupt and potentially catastrophic changes to the planet's functioning (Rockström et al., 2009).

literature. Analysing 114 papers that define the CE, Kirchherr et al. (2017) found that only 19% considered consumption. Furthermore, Borrello et al. (2017) underline that there is only limited understanding of the reasons why consumers may choose to engage or not engage in circular practices. According to Kirchherr et al. (2017, p. 228), "[t]his negligence of the consumer in CE definitions may be reflective of a research gap regarding the consumers' perspective on CE." It has further been pointed out that the lack of consumer acceptance of circular solutions is one of the main barriers to moving towards a CE (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018; Szilagyi et al., 2022; Tukker, 2015). To overcome these challenges, it is important to understand how consumption and consumers are affected by the CE (Kirchherr et al., 2017). As Camacho-Otero et al. (2018, p. 2) underline, "the circular economy might translate into significant changes in people's everyday lives, but there seems to be little understanding of such alterations in the scientific literature, and the policies promoting the circular economy." Addressing this point, this chapter first looks at circular consumption behaviours and circular business models, before critically assessing the role of the user-consumer (i.e., the citizen) in current CE approaches.

2.2.1 Circular Consumption Behaviours and Business Models

According to researchers from the field of consumption studies, consumption is defined as "a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion" (Warde, 2005, p. 137). Based on the work of Evans (2018), Camacho-Otero et al. (2020) identified six main phases of consumption: acquisition, appropriation, appreciation, devaluation, divestment, and disposition. Drawing on the CE definition of Kirchherr et al. (2017), the authors argue that "circular consumption is then the process of acquisition, appropriation, appreciation, devaluation, divestment and disposal of products and services that allows for reducing, or alternatively, reusing, recycling and recovering of materials" (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020, p. 75). This means that in a CE, consumers would need to engage in a series of behaviours that enable circular consumption. Following the six different consumption stages, Camacho-Otero et al. (2020) present a diagram of different circular consumption activities, which are displayed in Figure 2.





Source: Camacho-Otero et al. (2020, p. 76).

For instance, during the acquisition phase, consumers would purchase pre-owned, remanufactured, refurbished, or recycled products. Alternatively, consumers – or in this case users – could also rent a product or a service. During the 'use-phase' (i.e., appropriation, appreciation, devaluation, divestment), products and goods should be used as long as possible, in order to reduce the need for new materials. During this phase, consumers could, for example, retain or repair products. Finally, during the disposition phase, consumers should be encouraged to re-enter products into the system by either returning them for repair and resale, reselling them themselves, or giving them away (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020). As Camacho-Otero et al. (2020, p. 3) further underline, a CE "requires more than swapping one type of product purchase for an equivalent more 'sustainable' or 'green' acquisition." In fact, as shown in the description above, it requires fundamental changes in consumption behaviour "in order to bring about a full scale transition away from linear systems and reduce the need for primary energy and material production" (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020, pp. 3–4).

In an attempt to facilitate the transition to a CE, recent years have seen a proliferation of circular consumption models such as remanufactured products, product service systems (PSS), the sharing economy, or collaborative consumption (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these business models in greater detail, it is to note that clear definitions and a comprehensive list of circular business models are still lacking (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018). For instance, while Bocken et al. (2016) identified 6 circular business models, Lewandowski (2016) presented over 25 different strategies. At the same time, a growing number of studies have looked at what motivates consumers to change their behaviour and how to promote circular consumption (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018; 2020; Gullstrand Edbring et al., 2016; Szilagyi et al., 2022).

While the issues around consumer participation in circular business models are not yet fully resolved, it is worth noting that more critical voices have already questioned the actual environmental benefits of such approaches. For example, Camacho-Otero et al. (2018, p. 2) point out that "there is no conclusive evidence" that the sustainability promise of circular consumption strategies is being fulfilled. As previously mentioned, some studies suggest that CE business models actually increase the demand for resources (Hobson & Lynch, 2016; Iran & Schrader, 2017). According to Zink & Geyer (2017, p. 594), there is therefore "no a priori reason to assume a closed loop is superior." As the authors argue, the central question is whether "secondary production actually prevents primary production" (Zink & Geyer, 2017, p. 594). In other words, "does the recycling of goods so that they can be used again (secondary production) replace and prevent raw materials (primary production) from entering resources streams?" (Hobson, 2021, p. 167). Such critical takes on circular business models conflict with current mainstream views of the CE, which emphasise the financial gains to be made (often presented as a 'win-win' situation). For example, as the EMF (2013, p. 5) puts it, the CE presents businesses with "an economic opportunity worth billions." Thus, the question arises if new circular business models can really address the root of the problem (i.e., overconsumption and unregulated capitalism) or if they are not more than just "(green) business as usual" (Hobson, 2021, p. 167). According to Hobson (2021, p. 172), achieving fundamental change would require CE models that "go beyond the modus operandi of consumerism." To be successful, such practices need to create "emotional and motivational engagements [...] that recalibrate our relations with the socio-materialities of everyday lives, and each other" (Hobson, 2021, p. 172). This also points to the urgent need for a new framing of the citizen within the CE: one that actually allows for a profound social change.

2.2.2 Reframing the Role of the Citizen in the CE

Citizens' perspectives are largely ignored in most CE literature (Kirchherr et al., 2017). When citizens (usually referred to as 'consumers' or 'users') are mentioned, they are usually portrayed as "passive and rational recipients that will follow labels and other production-side signals when making decisions" (Camacho-Otero, 2018, p. 2). Hobson & Lynch (2016, p. 16) therefore argue that "the role of the citizen thus appears to be fundamentally one of accepting or rejecting new and diverse business models." According to Spekkink et al. (2022, p. 2), "[t]his view is rooted in the assumption that the transition to the CE is a matter of technological and policy-driven innovation, with market forces acting as the key drivers of change [...] and with civil society being largely at the receiving end of these changes [...]."

In recent years, however, the role of the consumer in the CE has received more attention. For example, Ghisellini et al. (2016, p. 19) note that "the promotion of consumer responsibility is crucial for enhancing the [CE]", while Gallaud & Laperche (2016) argue that the consumer is the most central enabler of circular business models. According to Maitre-Ekern & Dalhammar (2019), focusing on consumers is crucial because they are at the centre of the value chain. "Achieving the goals of the CE will not be possible without their involvement. Consumers contribute to the CE notably by purchasing more durable products, with their readiness to repair items and by properly disposing of waste products" (Maitre-Ekern & Dalhammar, 2019, p. 395). As Maitre-Ekern & Dalhammar (2019, p. 398) further argue, "consumers cannot keep being considered merely as the vulnerable party that needs protecting, but as an agent of change, whose behaviour will make a difference in the struggle for sustainability." In their paper, they outline six key roles that consumers can play in the CE: purchaser, maintainer, repairer, seller, sharer and collaborator, or waste manager (Figure 3).

Main role	Main potential activities/interests that can support the CE				
Purchaser	Avoiding purchasing unnecessary items				
	Rewarding circular business models in their purchasing decisions				
	• Making use of product labels, information and look for missing information				
	Optimizing the product choice				
	• Purchasing re-used and second-hand products as alternatives to new products				
	• Leasing instead of buying products and services				
	Focusing on the services instead of the products				
	Buying durable, high-quality products				
	Buying products for which spare parts are available				
Maintainer	Avoiding replacing products that work				
	• Prolonging the life of products (proper use; maintenance; updates)				
Repairer	Preferring repair to buying new				
	• Engaging with own repairs when possible (DIY); communities				
	(for example, repair cafés)				
	• Taking part in repair workshops etc.				
Seller	• Avoiding throwing away items that can be sold or re-used				
Sharer and collaborator	Prioritizing sharing schemes over leasing or buying				
	• Engaging with P2P schemes enabling sharing of resources				
Engaging with waste	• Handing in items for re-use rather than recycling				
sorting and re-use	• Ensuring waste is sorted and collected properly				

Figure 3. Attempted mapping of the roles of consumers in the CE.

CE: circular economy; DIY: do-it-yourself; P2P: peer-to-peer.

Source: Maitre-Ekern & Dalhammar (2019, p. 399).

Framing consumers as active agents challenges the depoliticised role of citizens within prevailing CE approaches (Hobson & Lynch, 2016). At the same time, so-called 'alternative consumer practices' (Littler, 2009) can be understood as a "form of resistance to the dominant 'throwaway' paradigm" (Graziano & Trogal, 2017, p. 635), with the aim of creating a new consumption culture. According to Korhonen et al. (2018, p. 41), such new consumption systems are characterised by "user groups and communities sharing the use of the function, service and value of physical products [...] as opposed to individuals that only own and consume ("run down") the physical products." As highlighted earlier, it remains questionable, however, to what extent such new forms of consumption can effectively reform consumerism (Hobson & Lynch, 2016; Tukker, 2015).

Another important concept is the so-called 'citizen-consumer' (Johnston, 2008). As Bradley & Persson (2022, p. 1322) explain, the citizen-consumer concept emphasises "the hybrid role that people have as consumers, citizens and activists, reaching beyond the notion of individuals as simply self-interested consumers." Originating from ethical consumer discourse and ideas of consumer activism, the concept assumes that people can incorporate the values associated with their roles as citizens into their decision-making process as consumers (Lockie, 2009; Seyfang, 2006). In other words, citizens are being framed as active agents who can bring about progressive social change through their consumption choices. On the other hand, the concept also emphasises the role of citizens in the political and economic system that goes beyond consumption. In fact, the notion of the citizen-consumer highlights the political power of citizens who have the potential to influence and change the economic system. The question now is how to strengthen this active role of citizens in the CE. Against this background, the next section outlines the idea of a circular society and discusses to what extent it can provide a potential pathway for future CE approaches.

2.3 Towards a Circular Society

2.3.1 Going Beyond 'Weak' Approaches to Sustainability

Over the past years, various actors, including states, regions, and multiple organisations, have been promoting the CE as "a viable and desirable model of a future socio-economic system" (Hobson & Lynch, 2016, p. 17). The EMF (2015 p. 5), for example, argues that the CE "has the potential to help us make better decisions about resource use, design out waste, provide added value for business, and proceed along a secure route to society-wide prosperity and environmental sustainability for future generations." In that sense, the CE is portrayed as a "radical shift in perspective" (EMF, 2015, p. 29), which is enabled by technological innovations and the right policy environment. This narrative suggests that environmental, social, and economic goals can be reconciled without fundamentally disrupting the status quo in terms of power, norms, and politics (Dauvergne, 2008; Hobson & Lynch, 2016). Based on the idea of 'green growth' (e.g., Hickel & Kallis, 2020), these approaches therefore point to "the possibility of overcoming environmental crises without leaving the path of modernization" (Gibbs, 2006, p. 196).

However, as already mentioned, critics have questioned whether current CE approaches can actually achieve the socio-economic and environmental objectives they actively seek to promote. According to Hobson & Lynch (2016), this is in fact not the case. As the authors underline, current CE approaches represent a 'weak' rather than a 'strong' form of sustainability that is mainly characterised by the framing of citizens as passive users or consumers. In short, they argue that "whereas the CE may appear radical from a twentieth century technical-industrial and business model perspective, it arguably reinforces the social norms, expectations and roles ascribed to us all within the post-industrial, service and consumption-based capitalist economies of the Global North, and increasingly, the Global South" (Hobson & Lynch, 2016, p. 18). What is needed, therefore, is a new socio-economic system and forms of consumption that "disrupt mainstream economies and consumerism, improve social cohesion, and contribute to the minimization of resource use" (Heinrichs, 2013, p. 229). To achieve such a transformative shift, scholars have underlined the pivotal role of citizens and civil society (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021). Spekkink et al. (2022, p. 2), for example, argue "that all societal actors need to be involved in a socioecological transformation toward circularity." It is against this background that the idea of a CS has emerged over the past few years. However, it remains unclear what such a CS would look like. As Hobson & Lynch (2016, p. 16) put it: "What form then could and should circular socio-economic institutions, norms and shared practices take, and what processes, values and actors will get us there?"

2.3.2 What Would a Future Circular Society Look Like?

The question of what a future CS – or a future CE in general – might look like has not yet received much attention. In fact, the majority of studies on CE do not address possible future scenarios at all (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). Moreover, as outlined in previous sections of this paper, there is only little understanding of the impact of the CE on citizens and how they can play an active role in driving the transition to a CE (Kirchherr et al. 2017).

In an attempt to address some of these questions, Bakker et al. (2018) present two CE scenarios that have varying impacts on consumers. The first scenario involves companies providing services where they own and maintain products, while consumers access them without the responsibility of ownership. As the authors argue, this would result in a low level of effort for consumers to consume sustainably, as they would not have to worry about the burdens of ownership such as maintenance, repair, and disposal. In the second scenario, consumers actively take part in the CE through local initiatives such as repair cafés and peerto-peer sharing, giving them control and responsibility over their products. Addressing the differences between these two scenarios also requires a "debate on the questions of power and equity in the transition towards circular economies" (Bradley & Persson, 2022, p. 1323). As Bradley & Persson (2022, p. 1323) note, "the path towards more circular economies is not a consensus win-win journey, but is instead characterised by diverging perspectives on the roles and powers of citizen-consumers and corporations as well as on the control of materials, skills, and resources." This argument, then, points to Tukker's (2015, p. 88) comment that the key goal for "consumers is to have control over things, artifacts, and life itself." Achieving this, however, will require more than just a new set of consumption practices and innovative business models. In fact, in the words of Hobson (2021, p. 173), it "points towards the CE as being nothing short of a recalibration of our socio-material lives, if the ambitions of the agenda are in any way to be matched by the systemic transformations it will indeed require."

The role of the citizen in a future CS is therefore an important one. On the one hand, citizens 'perform the CE' by adopting circular consumption practices such as repairing or reselling. On the other hand, and more importantly, citizens reinforce the transition towards the CE by promoting new socio-economic visions such as conviviality and non-market relations (Bradley & Persson, 2022). As Spekkink et al. (2022, p. 2) note, however, "realizing this potential for change through consumer action requires conscious coordination among consumers, in the absence of which consumers are more likely to continue their 'regular' consumption behavior." The CS is therefore also a political project that is characterised by citizen-led bottom-up initiatives such as community repair initiatives (Bradley & Persson, 2022), waste collection organisations (Gutberlet et al., 2017), or the maker movement (Unterfrauner et al., 2019). As Spekkink et al. (2022, p. 2) further point out, "[i]t is therefore important to also investigate the roles of civil society in which conscious coordination does take place in (transitions to) the CE, such as in organized citizen initiatives."

Finally, in their paper entitled 'There is no sustainable circular economy without a circular society', Jaeger-Erben et al. (2021) discuss some of the main points that should be integrated in a CS. First, they argue that a CS should establish a homeostasis between ecological, social, and technological systems, through "a re-valuation of human labor and an enhanced role and conditions for productive work, service provision and do-it-yourself (DIY) activities" (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021, p. 1). While these aspects are rarely acknowledged in mainstream CE debates today, they were addressed by early CE proponents such as Stahel (1982; 2016). As Jaeger-Erben et al. (2021) further argue, the goal of a CS is to transform the way we interact with each other and with nature by emphasising values such as care, connectivity, and cooperation, rather than neglect, separation, and rivalry. This, in turn, requires a rethinking of our relationships with both humans and the natural world. Secondly, a CS should challenge and transform capitalist value definitions. In the current linear and capitalist economic system, value creation is profoundly intertwined with social and ecological destruction. As highlighted earlier, although current CE approaches aim to decouple value creation from (at least environmental) destruction, they tend to fall short of this promise (Bradley & Persson, 2022). Jaeger-Erben et al. (2021, p. 2) thus argue that "[m]ultidimensional concepts of value creation are needed that define qualitative and quantitative indicators for social and ecological value creation and which take into account the many forms

of work (care work, informal work, community work, do-it-yourself) that contribute to societal well-being." Thirdly, a CS should emphasise the significance of sufficiency and systems of provision that promote reduced consumption and circular activities such as refuse, rethink, and reduce. Lastly, and connected to the previous point, a CS should foster agency rather than passivity. As Jaeger-Erben et al. (2021) argue, citizens should have the ability and opportunity to take part in circular systems of production and consumption. This could involve participating in activities such as co-designing and co-creating products and services, as well as engaging in social innovation processes related to DIY, repair, and care. Moreover, people should be encouraged to form communities centred around collaborative consumption and peer production practices. However, while these are promising approaches, Jaeger-Erben et al. (2021, p. 2) point out that "[t]he CS debate is still young, dynamic and in many parts more visionary than practical." It is thus the aim of this paper to contribute to this emerging debate, by outlining the key elements of a CS and discussing the role of citizens, businesses, and the state in such a model.

III Research Gap and Research Questions

In the face of the escalating global climate crisis and intensifying resource scarcity, the CE concept arguably offers a welcome beacon of hope that a balance between environmental, social, and economic goals can still be achieved. While the ideas of the CE are by no means new, it seems that the current global context has finally allowed for their rapid proliferation. Indeed, in recent years a growing number of governments, businesses, NGOs, and academics have embraced and promoted the CE concept (Hobson, 2021). At the same time, the CE is framed not only as a remedy for the multiple and deepening environmental issues, but also as an important comparative advantage in today's global economy. For example, as the European Commission (2015, p. 1) states in its 'EU action plan for the Circular Economy', the promotion of a CE will enable the EU to move toward "a sustainable, low carbon, resource efficient and competitive economy [and] to transform our economy and generate new and sustainable competitive advantages for Europe." By replacing the traditional linear economic model with new practices such as recycling, repair and reuse, the CE promises nothing less than "sustainable growth in the context of mounting pressures on global resources" (Hobson & Lynch, 2016, p. 17).

However, as I have shown in the literature review of this thesis, current CE approaches often fail to go beyond rebranding and repackaging 'weak' sustainability agendas that have been in place for decades. As Hobson (2020, p. 163) writes, the "focus on continued economic growth has created and entrenched various forms of 'green accumulation' [...], which has done little to transform prevailing economic systems, norms, and practices." Consequently, despite increased recycling rates and the proliferation of better product designs, the global demand of resources is still set to increase further in the coming years (International Resource Panel, 2020). Thus, while some applaud the CE as a fundamentally new 'technological revolution' (EMF, 2013), others argue that CE proponents are echoing eco-modernist visions and that the CE is nothing more than a simple recalibration of capitalism (Hobson & Lynch, 2016). Taking a step back, I argue that at the heart of this debate is the question of how a CE can actually achieve a large-scale socio-economic transformation that allows for the creation of an economic system that operates within the limits of our planetary boundaries. Based on the preceding literature review, I argue that current CE approaches are ill-equipped to enable such a transformation since they fail to address the social dimension of the CE. As I have shown earlier, current framings of the CE do not adequately consider the role of citizens and neglect the broader socio-economic implications of a circular future. Instead, current CE models are mainly framed as "new business and market development opportunities [that] can be realised, in part, through recalibrating supply chains [...] and creating new 'circular' business models [...] that keep the consumer doing exactly that: consuming" (Hobson, 2021, p. 169).

Against this background, this thesis seeks to contribute to the emerging critical discussion on the role of citizens in current CE approaches and how their involvement in the CE can be strengthened. In this sense, I address Hobson's (2021, p. 173) point calling "for critical research into CE user-consumer roles [that] goes beyond restating arguments about the 'responsibilization' of the consumer [...], where the (environmental) buck is passed down from businesses and governments to us all, as the (alleged) sovereign consumers to whom markets are merely responding." What is needed, then, is a new culture of consumption and a CE model that offers "an alternative framing that is going beyond growth, technology and market-based solutions" (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021, p. 1). Focusing on these points, the aim of this thesis is to contribute to the emerging debate on the need for a CS and to discuss the role of citizens, businesses, and the state in such a model. To put it in the words of Hobson & Lynch (2016, p. 22), "if the CE is indeed the next big political and economic project [...], then the role, potential and place of the citizen – and indeed the economy as a complex socio-political entity – needs to be subject to further critical consideration, including engagement with more 'radical' ideas about the pathways, aims and roles ascribed to us all within a more circular society [...]." Given the fact that the CS concept has only been introduced in CE research in the past few years, it still lacks a commonly accepted definition as well as agreement on its defining principles, norms, and its socio-political impacts. Addressing these gaps, this thesis focuses on the following two research questions:

What are the key elements of a circular society? What role do citizens, businesses, and the state play in a circular society?

In the following chapters, I will first outline the theoretical foundations of my thesis and outline the method employed in this paper, before presenting and discussing my main findings in the analysis section.

IV Theoretical Framework

For its theoretical underpinnings, this paper draws on work from both degrowth and sustainable consumption research. While the two fields present different solutions to current socio-environmental problems, I argue that they both offer important insights for the subsequent discussion on what a future CS might look like.

4.1 Degrowth

Since its emergence in the 1970s, degrowth - or *décroissance* in its original French form - has developed into a fundamental critique of the prevailing ideology of economic growth and capitalist accumulation (Akbulut, 2021). At its core, degrowth calls for material downscaling and radically questions mainstream economic imperatives such as efficiency and profit maximisation (Demaria et al., 2013). While the history of degrowth can be traced back to various sources and traditions, two lines of thinking have dominated its conceptual emergence. On the one hand, the development of the degrowth paradigm was heavily influenced by Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen's (1971) thermodynamic theory of economic processes. Based on the second law of thermodynamics, Georgescu-Roegen argued that economic processes necessarily involve the conversion of low-entropy energy and materials into high-entropy waste and pollution. As a result, he argued, energy is lost and becomes unusable in the form of waste or heat during every production process. Georgescu-Roegen's theory has since been employed as a fundamental critique of the various forms of eco-modernisation. As Akbulut (2021, p. 100) argues: "As complete recycling of energy is impossible, biophysical limits to growth, in the form of resource-availability or waste-absorption capacities, are binding. Even a nongrowing economy would always need fresh sources of energy and materials, ultimately depleting environmental resources and/or sinks." Indeed, there is a lack of empirical evidence that economic growth can be effectively decoupled from its environmental impacts, even if more environmentally efficient production or recycling technologies were to be developed (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). Degrowth advocates therefore call for a reduction in the material and energy consumption of economies, arguing that this can only be achieved through a process of downsizing, not through future advances in innovation (Akbulut, 2021).

The second line of thought, on the other hand, suggests that infinite growth, even if achievable, is *per se* undesirable (Akbulut, 2021). Based on the ideals of autonomy and democracy, this second group of thinkers argues that "the increased scale of economic activity undermines the ability to self-govern" (Akbulut, 2021, p. 101). For Latouche (2005b), for

example, autonomy "is intrinsically linked to exiting a social imaginary dominated by economism and thus to liberation from an externally imposed growth imperative" (in Akbulut, 2021, p. 101). He thus calls for a "decolonisation the imaginary" (Latouche, 2005a), which refers to the process of separating social interactions, roles, and actions from economic concepts and demands, and reclaiming their political significance by establishing avenues for collective decision-making (Akbulut, 2021). In this sense, as underlined by Akbulut (2021, p. 101), "reimagining and reconstructing the economic sphere as a domain where democratic and intentional decisions can be made is an integral component of degrowth."

Based on the considerations outlined above, it becomes apparent that degrowth goes beyond simple material downscaling and the reduction of economic accumulation. Instead, degrowth calls for a far more encompassing social, economic, and political transformation (Kallis, 2011). As Akbulut (2021, p. 99) puts it, "degrowth is not only a quantitative issue of doing less of the same but is also a qualitative issue of doing *differently*. It denotes a reorientation of economic relations toward a different structure, along different principles, in order to serve different functions" (original emphasis). Degrowth thus proposes a shift towards a society that organises its social metabolism – i.e., the set of material and energy flows that take place between the natural environment and society – differently. This reorganisation is guided by principles such as autonomy, justice, solidarity, democracy, conviviality, sharing, and care (Akbulut, 2021; Kallis et al., 2015).

Although the degrowth paradigm has gained increasing attention in recent years, it has come under attack on many fronts. One of the key critiques is the allegation "that there is no single defensible definition in the degrowth literature of what is it that has to degrow" (Kallis, 2011, p. 873). As underlined by Akbulut (2021, p. 102), the fact that a considerable number of people do not have access to essential material requirements is frequently cited "to endorse the idea that at least *some* things need to grow in *some* parts of the world" (original emphasis). It is important to note, however, that the degrowth literature acknowledges that even in an ecologically sustainable future, some economic activities will still need to grow. Kallis (2011), for example, adopts Latouche's (2009a) concept of 'selective degrowth' which distinguishes between activities that need to degrow and those that can continue to grow. Specifically, Kallis argues that things like renewable-energy infrastructure, education and health services, or localised organic food production can still be beneficial and feasible even in an economy that aims to reduce its overall size.

This point then turns our attention back to the question of what production and consumption activities are compatible with an environmentally sustainable future, and how

economic processes would need to be restructured to achieve this goal. The focus should therefore be on the qualitative aspect of capitalist processes, an area that has not yet received much attention in the degrowth literature (Akbulut, 2021). Against this background, the next section presents the main pillars of the literature on sustainable consumption in order to complete the theoretical foundation of this thesis.

4.2 Sustainable Consumption

While a degrowing economy may sound appealing (and urgently necessary) to some, the idea arguably faces a lot of headwinds in current political and economic debates. Indeed, it cannot be ignored that continued economic growth is perhaps one of the most important policy goals of modern post-war governments. According to the prevailing economic logic, household consumption levels are inherently linked to economic growth. The argument goes that if household consumption were to decrease, economic growth would come to a halt, leading to the possibility of recession and rising unemployment, which could ultimately undermine the government's reputation and credibility (Jackson, 2007). At the same time, however, it has been argued that "growth of the economy in no way guarantees increasing incomes for the majority of the population (an expectation based on the post-war experience), let alone an increase in welfare or quality of life" (Spangenberg, 2014, p. 62). In addition, as pointed out in previous sections of this thesis, overconsumption has been linked to rising resource scarcity and environmental degradation (Meadows et al., 1972).

While these considerations are at the heart of both degrowth and sustainable consumption theory, the two approaches draw different conclusions from them. In fact, proponents of sustainable consumption argue that while degrowth policies might be successful in respecting the environmental limits of our planet, they fail to maintain current levels of welfare and quality of life (Schwartzman, 2012; Spangenberg, 2014). The sustainable consumption approach thus draws on the concept of sustainable development and emphasises the need to strike a balance between the two core elements of the concept, i.e., satisfying human needs and respecting the limits imposed by the environment (Spangenberg, 2014; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Sustainable consumption proponents argue that "neither underconsumption nor overconsumption is sustainable. Any sustainable consumption policy worth its name must limit resource consumption in absolute terms [...]. It must also help eradicate poverty, that is socially unsustainable underconsumption, an objective so far pursued by economic growth strategies" (Spangenberg, 2014, p. 62). In short, sustainable consumption aims to reconcile social and environmental concerns by maintaining or improving living standards in the face of diminishing resource availability.

The so-called 'environmental space' concept was one of the earliest ideas that sought to find a balance between socially unsustainable underconsumption and environmentally unsustainable overconsumption (Spangenberg, 2014). First introduced by J. B. Opschoor in 1987, the environmental space describes an area of sustainable consumption, where "[t]he planetary boundaries help to quantify the "ceiling," while the social protection floor concept operationalizes the *linea de dignidad*, the minimal conditions for a dignified life" (Spangenberg, 2014, p. 62, original emphasis). To achieve this goal, Spangenberg (2014) proposes a shift in consumption patterns toward "better but less" for affluent groups, and "enough and better" for the people who are still living in poverty.

Another central point in this debate is the question of how economic consumption (i.e., the consumption of goods and services) can be decoupled from material resource consumption (i.e., the consumption of material inputs necessary to manufacture goods and services) (Jackson, 2007). One proposed solution is the so-called 'green growth' theory, which "asserts that continued economic expansion is compatible with our planet's ecology, as technological change and substitution will allow us to absolutely decouple GDP growth from resource use and carbon emissions" (Hickel & Kallis, 2020, p. 469). On the one hand, green growth policies have the objective of promoting environmentally friendly production and products, for instance by providing R&D subsidies for green technologies, levying environmental taxes, or enforcing regulations such as emission or efficiency standards. On the other hand, green growth policies also aim to increase consumer adoption of 'green' innovations by promoting environmental awareness and motivating consumers to select environmentally friendly products (Geels et al., 2015). However, while green growth policies have received considerable attention in recent years, their impact on environmental and social sustainability has been limited (Dale et al., 2016). As Geels et al., (2015, p. 4) point out, green growth approaches have "the tendency to focus on short-term efficiency gains on a product-by-product basis rather than on longer-term, multi-actor changes in socio-technical systems and practices." Other studies also echo the concern that a simple proliferation of new green innovations, coupled with market instruments and information provision, will not be sufficient to address the scale and urgency of the global environmental problems at hand (Geels et al., 2015; Unmüßig et al., 2012). As Hickel & Kallis (2020, p. 469) argue, for instance, "there is no empirical evidence that absolute decoupling from resource use can be achieved on a global scale against a background of continued economic growth."

Despite these critiques, sustainable consumption research has offered crucial insights in how consumers and businesses are embedded in social and politico-economic structures such as routines, conventions, habits, or the institutional embeddedness of markets (Geels et al., 2015). Furthermore, research on consumer behaviour has highlighted the socio-cultural meanings as well as the subconscious mechanisms related to consumption (Kennedy et al., 2015; Sanne, 2002). For example, Jackson (2007, p. 260) writes that consumption serves not only the satisfaction of functional needs, but it also plays a crucial role in "the construction of identity, the pursuit of status and social distinction, the maintenance of social cohesion, social and/or sexual selection, negotiation of the boundary between the sacred and the profane, and the pursuit of personal and collective meaning." At the same time, people often fail to change unsustainable consumption patterns due to factors beyond their control. For instance, consumers find themselves 'locked in' to unsustainable behaviours due to 'perverse' incentive structures such as economic constraints, institutional barriers, or inequalities in access (Jackson, 2007). In short, when promoting the adoption of sustainable consumption practices, one cannot forget about the underlying factors that have an important influence on actual consumption practices.

Attempting to combine the streams of research presented above, I argue that sustainable consumption research has the potential to inform degrowth thinking by increasing the applicability of degrowth theory in everyday life. Acknowledging the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of consumption, I draw on both degrowth and sustainable consumption research to theorise what a future CS could look like. In particular, I take up Latouche's (2009a) concept of 'selective degrowth' and argue that while there is an urgent need to downsize our economies, certain goods and services will continue to grow in a CS. However, to address excessive economic growth and overconsumption, I argue that fundamentally different patterns of consumption and production are needed. Vergragt (2013, p. 124), for instance, suggests that societies should "foster new forms of business ownership, emphasize local and informal economies (self-provisioning, collaborative consumption, local currencies, time banks, product-to-service alternatives, and others), and possibly shorter working hours with mandated living wages." Based on these considerations, the final part of this thesis presents a discussion on what a future CS might look like and what guiding principles it would follow. Before presenting the main analysis of my work, however, I will discuss the methodology of my thesis in the next section.

V Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach of this research paper. The chapter starts with a discussion of the research approach and method. Next, the data collection process is explained. At the end of the chapter, some of the limitations of this thesis are addressed.

5.1 Research Approach and Method

This master's thesis is based on a qualitative research approach. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2011, p. 3), "qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." As Hancock et al. (2021) point out, a qualitative approach is more appropriate than a quantitative one in cases where there is only limited information available on a particular issue. Given the innovative nature of the CS concept, it was therefore appropriate to choose a qualitative methodology. Furthermore, a major advantage of qualitative research is its ability to explore social phenomena at a deeper level than relying solely on quantitative data (Silvermann, 2000).

According to Rubin & Rubin (2012), the main qualitative data-gathering methods include participant observation, documentary analysis, conversational and narrative analysis, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews. In this thesis, I relied mainly on expert interviews to gather the qualitative data. Expert interviews aim to explore and collect data on a particular area of interest, focusing on the knowledge of experts in a specific field of activity (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). Kaiser (2014) notes that an expert can be defined as an individual with extensive knowledge and expertise in a particular field, which is derived from their position, status, and recognised expertise in that subject matter. As highlighted by Rubin & Rubin (2012, p. 3), indepth qualitative interviews allow researchers to "explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others" as well as to gain insight into their view of the world. In total, eight interviews were conducted during the research process of this thesis. In terms of the sampling strategy, the choice of experts was based both on their expertise as well as their professional background. In a first step, a sample of CE experts from different fields, including academia, private sector, government, and civil society organisations, was compiled. In a second step, I reached out to these experts via Email or LinkedIn. It should be noted that most of the experts I have contacted did not respond to the request or were currently unavailable. The final sample is composed of two academics, two members of civil society organisations, and four representatives of the private sector. Table 1 provides a list of all interviewees, including their current institution and sector. It should also be noted that some experts have experience in more than one sector, which is reflected in a more comprehensive overview in Appendix A.

Nr.	Date	Name	Institution/Company	Sector
1	04.05.2023	Nadja Hempel	Hans Sauer Stiftung	Civil society
2	05.05.2023 Arthur Parry Fundatio		Fundatio Consulting	Business
3	05.05.2023	Martin Calisto Friant	Autonomous University of	Academia
			Barcelona	
4	11.05.2023 Brais Suárez Eiroa University of Vi		University of Vigo	Academia
5	11.05.2023	Tom Koch	Rytec Switzerland	Business
6	12.05.2023	Natacha Klein	Maneco	Business
7	15.05.2023	Josip Pervan	World Business Council for	Business
			Sustainable Development	
			(WBCSD)	
8	17.05.2023	Felix Stähli	Impact Hub Geneva &	Civil society
			Lausanne	

Table 1. List of Interviews.

Source: Author's compilation.

In addition to the interviews, secondary research was conducted to allow for a better understanding of certain aspects highlighted by the interviewees. As explained by Heaton (2008), secondary research consists of analysing pre-existing data that was originally collected for a different research purpose. In this thesis, secondary research was conducted using information from research journals, previous studies on the topic, and other documents obtained mainly from online sources including the websites of public agencies and government reports. In short, the integration of secondary research alongside the interviews enhanced the depth and breadth of the research and allowed to put the findings into a broader context.

5.2 Data Collection

As mentioned above, qualitative in-depth interviews were chosen as the main data collection method of this master's thesis. Qualitative interviews can be divided into two main types: semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The data collection of this qualitative research paper was conducted through semi-structured interviews with open-

ended questions. As highlighted by Horton et al. (2004, p. 340), semi-structured interviews "enable certain responses to be questioned in greater depth, and in particular to bring out and resolve apparent contradictions." Moreover, the interviewees are granted a certain level of autonomy to freely express their emotions, thoughts, and experiences (Horton et al. 2004). According to Rubin & Rubin (2012), semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to focus on a particular topic that is defined in advance, using some key questions as a guideline. Accordingly, a set of guiding questions was prepared and used in all interviews. In addition, several follow-up questions were asked during the interview which emerged from the dialogue and allowed to obtain more in-depth information.

Due to the different geographical locations of the interviewees, all interviews were conducted virtually via Webex. Notes were taken directly during the interviews as well as at a later stage while listening to the recordings. In a next step, the gathered interview data was transcribed and evaluated. All interview transcripts can be found in Appendix B. Once the interviews had been transcribed, thematic and content analysis approaches were used to evaluate the data (e.g., Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This method allowed to establish an overarching impression of the data and identify common themes in the responses. Following the approach of Brewster et al. (2014, p. 163), I first aimed to identify "broad topic areas or domains." In a second step, I summarised "participants' statements into core ideas that captured the main points in each domain." Thirdly, I assessed "the consistency of each of the themes across individual cases." Finally, I interpreted the findings and discussed them in relation to my research questions.

5.3 Limitations

The research process of this thesis has been subject to several limitations which are discussed in this section. Firstly, there is a sample size and selection bias which is due to the relatively small number of interviews conducted for this thesis. It is to note that the limited sample has a potential impact on the representativeness of the answers as well as the breadth of perspectives obtained. Furthermore, it limits the generalisability of the findings. It should also be noted that there is no government representative in the interview sample, which further limits the findings.

The low number of interviews is mainly due to a second important limitation, namely time and resource constraints. Given the short timeframe of this thesis, it was not possible to conduct additional interviews. While a considerable number of interview requests were sent out, the majority of them remained unanswered. Some key experts also declined to be interviewed due to time constraints on their part. The fact that some potential interviewees did not respond to the request therefore introduces the possibility of response bias. In other words, it is likely that some of the experts who declined to participate in an interview have different perspectives that consequentially were not included in the overall findings. In addition to the limited time available for data collection, there were also some constraints on access to certain experts or relevant secondary sources.

A third limitation is the fact that the methodology of this thesis is mainly based on expert interviews and publicly available secondary data. Additional approaches, such as on-site visits of community-led CE initiatives or conferences, would have allowed to increase the diversity of data sources and perspectives. In addition, this would have allowed the data already collected to be placed in a broader context. However, due to limited time and resources, extensive on-site visits were not possible.⁵

Finally, it is important to highlight that, given the qualitative nature of this thesis, the analysis of the data is likely to be affected by subjectivity and researcher bias. In addition, it is to note that my presence and influence during the interviews may have impacted the responses provided by the interviewees. As highlighted by Alsaawi (2014), participants have a tendency to modify their responses or provide socially desirable answers, leading to potential bias in the data collected. Although the research process was conducted in a transparent and rigorous manner, it is nonetheless important to take these points into account when consulting the findings of this thesis.

⁵ It should be noted that I made one visit to a repair café in Gland, Switzerland in March 2023. However, because the visit was relatively short and did not follow a structured research process, I decided not to include it in the methodology of this paper.

VI Analysis and Discussion

In this chapter I present and discuss the main findings of my analysis. First, I highlight the need for a circular society by linking the idea to the broader concern of socio-ecological transformation. Secondly, I attempt to outline the key elements of a CS and provide some practical examples of what this model could look like. Finally, I discuss the role of citizens, businesses, and the state in a CS, before addressing some of the main challenges and criticisms.

6.1 Why Do We Need Circular Societies?

As highlighted in the literature review of this thesis, today's CE approaches tend to focus on eco-modernist visions of the future and are based on technocratic and depoliticised processes (Bradley & Persson, 2022). The prevailing narrative suggests that the CE allows to reconcile environmental, social, and economic goals without fundamentally disrupting the status quo in terms of power, norms, and politics (Dauvergne, 2008; Hobson & Lynch, 2016). This 'green growth' approach to the CE has come under increasing criticism in recent years (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Hofmann, 2022). Moreover, critics have pointed to the fact that current CE approaches barely address the social dimension (Blomsma & Brennan, 2017). In short, one of the main concerns is that the prevailing CE narrative ultimately "reinforces the social norms, expectations and roles ascribed to [citizens] within the post-industrial, service and consumption-based capitalist economies of the Global North, and increasingly, the Global South" (Hobson & Lynch, 2016, p. 18).

These issues have been highlighted by all experts interviewed for this thesis. In addition, some of the interviewees explicitly mentioned the need for a widespread socio-ecological transformation (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). This idea goes back to the work of Karl Polanyi (1944) who, in his book 'The Great Transformation', argued that the emergence of the liberal market economy led to a "disembedding" of the economy from its social interdependencies. Polanyi considers this "disembeddedness" as one of the root causes for the dissolution of social cohesion and social stability. To address this issue, he calls for a democratic, just, and solidary transformation of society in order to eliminate social inequalities and disentangle economic and political power constellations. Polanyi's considerations are at the basis of the idea of a CS, which ultimately aims to reorganise current forms of consumption and production and to establish a new social model based on the principles of democracy, solidarity, and participation (Hofmann et al., 2018). A CS thus seeks to re-embed the economy within the broader social and ecological

spheres to enable a system that can operate within the planetary boundaries. As one interviewee put it: "Circular society approaches go beyond the economic-centred ideas that currently dominate our worldview and our thinking. In today's circular economy approaches, the economy is at the centre, it's seen as primordial, it's seen as more important than other aspects of life. In a circular society, the economy is embedded within wider society, which is itself embedded within ecology and planet Earth" (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). The CS approach thus aims to integrate the CE into a more comprehensive model of social change. However, it should not be seen as a simple "add-on" to current CE approaches. As one interviewee pointed out, moving to a CS does not mean "just [adding] some more stakeholders or a social value" to current CE strategies (N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). Rather, the CS should be considered as a framework for shifting the technocentric focus of current CE models towards a more socio-ecological approach.

In addition to re-embedding the economy in the social and environmental spheres, the CS also aims to incorporate sufficiency strategies and challenge the prevailing power structures in the current political and economic system (N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). The CS thus goes beyond the CE, as it not only aims to circulate materials and resources in a sustainable manner, but also calls for a distribution of political and economic power (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). Linked to this point, several interviewees highlighted the connections between CS and degrowth (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023; T. Koch, personal communication, 11 May 2023; B. Suárez Eiroa, personal communication, 11 May 2023). As stated earlier, degrowth calls for a "reorientation of economic relations towards a different structure, along different principles, in order to serve different functions" (Akbulut, 2021, p. 99), which is also the aim of a CS. In Latouche's terms, a CS therefore seeks to "decolonise the imaginary" by creating new economic and social relations based on a reformed set of principles such as autonomy, justice, solidarity, democracy, conviviality, sharing, and care (Akbulut, 2021; M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). Moreover, while the CS approach recognises the need for growth in some areas – for example, renewable energy systems or care work – it calls for a redefinition of (economic) value on the basis of social justice and quality of life (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023; Hofmann et al., 2018; A. Parry, personal communication, 5 May 2023; J. Pervan, personal communication, 15 May 2023).

In summary, the CS aims to anchor current CE approaches within a broader socioecological transformation in order to decolonise the imaginary and create new economic, social, and political structures. On the one hand, this means that CE models need to become more inclusive. As one interviewee put it, "the processes of circular innovation should be more open and democratised so that people can really take part in the circular economy and also can benefit from its outcomes" (N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). On the other hand, the CS calls for the dismantling of prevailing power structures and the reduction of existing inequalities. As another interviewee argued, a central concern of a CS is therefore to reduce "the overconsumption and overproduction of the top 1-10% [...] in order to keep human society within ecological limits in a fair, equitable and sustainable way, thereby increasing human and planetary well-being" (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). The CS thus addresses the exacerbating issue that in today's world the majority of material and financial wealth is extremely unevenly distributed. Based on these considerations, and inspired by the work of Hofmann et al. (2018), I define the CS as the replacement of the linear, nontransparent, and inequitable economic system with a democratic, transparent, and cooperatively organised economic system that fosters autonomy, justice, solidarity, participation, conviviality, sharing, and care and allows to keep human society within ecological limits in a fair, equitable, and sustainable way. In the next section, I present the three main pillars of a CS and discuss some practical examples of what a CS could look like.

6.2 Main Pillars of a Circular Society

Based on the research conducted for this thesis, I have identified three main pillars of a CS: democratisation; conviviality and participation; and openness and transparency. In the following, I discuss these three pillars and present some practical examples.

6.2.1 First Pillar: Democratisation

The first and most important pillar of a CS is the democratisation of the economic and political spheres (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). In essence, this means opening up decision-making spaces to all members of society, allowing for the inclusion of alternative voices from socially marginalised or minority groups (Genovese & Pansera, 2021). One of the most effective ways of democratising the political sphere is through the establishment of citizens' assemblies as the main form of decision-making (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). Citizens' assemblies are made up of a group of randomly selected citizens, who come together to deliberate and make decisions on behalf

of the wider population. Research has shown that citizens' assemblies allow for a more inclusive and participatory approach to democracy, where decisions are made by a representative sample of the population rather than by elected officials. In fact, not only do citizens' assemblies create greater democratic legitimacy, but they are also more likely to lead to more transformative decisions than other forms of democracy because the participants are not subject to the pressure of re-election (Lang, 2007; Macq & Jacquet, 2023). According to Flanigan et al. (2021), citizens' assemblies are currently being administered in over 25 countries. While it has been mainly civil society organisations that have initiated citizens' assemblies, they are now also increasingly convoked by public authorities on municipal, regional, national, and supranational levels (OECD, 2020). As Flanigan et al. (2021, p. 548) write, "[t]he growing use of citizens' assemblies by governments is giving the decisions of these assemblies a more direct path to affecting policy. For example, two recent citizens' assemblies commissioned by the national legislature of Ireland led to the legalization of samesex marriage and abortion" (see also Irish Citizens' Assembly Project, n.d.; Devaney et al., 2020). Another example is the French Citizens' Convention on Climate Change (Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat, n.d.). Established in 2019 in response to the 'Gilets Jaunes' (Yellow Vests) protests, the goal of the Citizens' Convention was "to propose measures that could cut national greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030 in a spirit of social justice" (Bouyé, 2020, para. 4). After nine months of deliberation, the Citizens' Convention proposed a list of 50 measures, some of which - including the ban of short-haul domestic flights - were eventually implemented by the French government (BBC News, 2023; Democracy International, 2020).

Regarding the business and economic sphere, democratisation efforts should first and foremost target the private ownership of the means of production (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). As Genovese & Pansera (2021, p. 107) note, "[t]he CE agenda takes it for granted that the basic production unit is localised either in private or state-owned enterprises. Democracy in production-related decision-making is wholly absent in CE literature." The aim of a CS is therefore to push for "more collective forms of ownership and a more democratic form of management" (Genovese & Pansera, 2021, p. 107). This could take the form of worker-owned or self-managed enterprises, reclaimed factories, or co-operatives that operate outside the logic of the market economy (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; Parker et al. 2014). Again, research has shown that democratically governed companies tend to take more socially and environmentally responsible decisions (Boeger, 2018; Viggiani, 2011).

6.2.2 Second Pillar: Conviviality and Participation

Linked to the democratisation of the economic and political spheres, the second pillar of a CS consists in the expansion of participation opportunities in order to mobilise and empower citizens and small-scale communities. As pointed out by Hofmann (2022, p. 1), a CS "should keep value creation activities small-scale and embrace cooperative ownership models that support democratic participation in decision-making procedures and profits redistribution." The expansion of participation opportunities creates space for communality, collaboration and solidarity, which form the basic values and central logic of economic action in a CS (Hofmann et al., 2018). As highlighted by several interviewees, a CS is oriented towards communitybased organisational forms, such as cooperatives or solidary communities (B. Suárez Eiroa, personal communication, 11 May 2023; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023; N. Klein, personal communication, 12 May 2023). The foundation of a CS would therefore be "grassroots [and] locally based ways of living, sharing, and creating (e.g. transition initiatives, community energy groups, repair cafe, and community currencies) and global collectives of sub-national actors (e.g. local government, researchers, and service providers) [...]" (Hobson, 2020, p. 100). In these new circular ecosystems, the main objective would no longer be profit maximisation, but social and environmental impact. It is also important to note that these spaces need to be open and free to join for anyone (N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). As Hofmann et al. (2018, p. 225) put it, the aim of a CS is to create "free and experimental spaces that promote innovativeness and creativity beyond the classic logic of economic exploitation, to enable people to try out different solutions, to experience self-efficacy and thus to increase their ability to proactively meet new challenges."

One example of such a free and experimental space are so-called repair cafés. Repair cafés are community-led reparation workshops where skilled volunteers offer their expertise to help others repair their items for free. The aim of repair cafés is to reduce consumption and to create a space for do-it-together practices and non-market relations (Bradley & Persson, 2022; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). As Graziano & Trogal (2017, p. 636) point out, they also "represent sites where key discussions around current cultural and political issues can be confronted in an embedded manner." Moreover, van der Velden (2021) found that repair cafés and other community repair initiatives allow for the emergence of new understandings of the design of products, their durability, repairability, and maintenance, and strengthen product attachment. "Community repair, with its collectivist and non-profit approach, can therefore bring new perspectives and values in circular economy discourses" (van der Velden, 2021, p.

2). Lastly, as Bradley & Persson (2022, p. 1322) emphasise, "repair is not only about the instrumental fixing of products, but about building social relations and involving roles beyond consumerist identities." Some studies have therefore argued that activities such as repair and maintenance actively challenge the prevailing notions of technological progress and economic growth (Schmid, 2019).

6.2.3 Third Pillar: Openness and Transparency

Finally, a CS needs to be based on the principles of openness and transparency. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, this means that production, consumption, and decision-making spaces are open and accessible for all members of society. On the other hand, it also implies that information and knowledge are made commonly available (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023; Hofmann et al., 2018). As highlighted by one interviewee, there is a need for transparency and openness "both on the product and process level, but also openness in the sense of social cohesion so that different people join this transformation" (N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). Again, this point is linked to the broader objective of a CS to circulate not only material resources (which is the predominant concern of current CE approaches), but also power and wealth. As another interviewee put it: "In a circular society, we seek to circulate resources not only sustainably, but also fairly and democratically. Moreover, we seek to circulate not only resources, but also power. By power I mean political power, economic power or wealth. We're circulating wealth so that it's distributed more fairly. We try to circulate technology so that it can be open source and available to everyone. And we try to circulate knowledge so that it is accessible to everyone. That also means that we don't put up barriers for people in the Global South who don't have access to universities in the Global North where all the engineering and knowledge for new [technologies] is located" (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023).

One practical example of increased openness and transparency in production and consumption processes is the so-called digital product passport (DPP). According to Walden et al. (2021), a DDP is a digital record or document that contains comprehensive information about a specific product throughout its entire life cycle. It serves as a standardised and transparent way to capture and communicate information about a product's design, materials, manufacturing processes, as well as its environmental and social impacts. By providing detailed information about a product's composition and lifecycle, a DPP can support various stakeholders in making informed choices regarding product design, production, use, and end-

of-life management (Adisorn et al., 2021). The so-called battery passport, which has been introduced by the European Commission's battery regulation draft proposal in 2020, is the one of the first applied examples of a DPP. As Walden et al. (2021, p. 1718) explain, the EU's battery passport "targets the entire life cycle of industrial and electric vehicle batteries with the aim to boost the circular economy of the battery value chain." While these initiatives allow for more transparency in production processes, they can also lead to more innovation in the long run. As a business representative put it during one of the interviews: "It would want to see this much more in the private sector because the lack of transparency is blocking innovation" (T. Koch, personal communication, 11 May 2023).

6.3 Role of Different Stakeholders in a Circular Society

Moving towards a CS also means that the main stakeholders of the political and economic system – i.e., the state, businesses, and citizens – assume new roles and responsibilities. While current CE models are predominantly centred around privately-owned businesses that continue to operate within a capitalist and market-based logic, the CS puts citizens and communities at the centre of its concerns (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). In such a model, businesses and governments would go beyond profit maximisation and continuous economic growth to actively promote the wellbeing of both human and non-human life (Bauwens, 2021; Nesterova, 2020). In the following, I will first address the role of citizens and civil society, before discussing how businesses and governments can allow for the emergence of a CS.

6.3.1 Citizens and Civil Society

While in current CE approaches citizens are framed as passive recipients of circular business models, the role of citizens in a CS is a much more active one (N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023; N. Klein, personal communication, 12 May 2023). Rather than simply consuming circular products or using circular business models, citizens in a CS take on a variety of roles such as maintainers, repairers, sellers, sharers, or collaborators (Maitre-Ekern & Dalhammar, 2019). Moving away from the technocentric focus of current CE models therefore implies a reorientation towards different circularity strategies. Considering the different R-strategies in a CE, citizens in a CS would therefore focus more on the 'upper' Rs, such as refuse, reduce, or repair (N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). It is also important to note that the CS approach emphasises that most of these activities should be non-

commodified, i.e., outside the capitalist logic. As discussed earlier, this means that the role of communities and cooperatives would be much more important in a CS. As one interviewee explained: "Citizens would share their skills and knowledge in repair cafés, for example. Or they would volunteer their time in community kitchens, urban farming projects, community composting initiatives, or in community care networks for the elderly or children" (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). The non-commodified nature of these activities is also the main difference with current sharing economy models such as Airbnb or Uber. As one interviewee pointed out, these business models are not really based on sharing, but rather on 'platform capitalism', aimed at maximising the profit of the company running the platform (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023).

In addition to their active role in local communities, citizens play an important role in building bottom-up pressure to change the political environment. Indeed, the importance of grassroots movements and civil society protests was highlighted by several interviewees (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 17 May 2023; F. Stähli, personal communication, 11 May 2023; B. Suárez Eiroa, personal communication, 11 May 2023). Civil society movements are an important catalyst for the democratisation process, which is the foundation of a CS. Of course, it is clear that many governments are reluctant to fundamentally reshape the power structures within society. As one interviewee pointed out, however, "we shouldn't be shy about remembering how history has been shaped by people taking to the streets and demanding change" (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). Another interviewee further argued that "protests are an essential lever to bring about these structural changes more quickly" (F. Stähli, personal communication, 11 May 2023). Citizens would thus play a dual role as activists. On the one hand, as citizen-consumers engaging in circular activities that transcend consumer identities and build social relations within local communities. And on the other hand, as members of civil society movements demanding political change.

Finally, it should be noted that not all members of society need to be involved in a CS in the same way. As some interviewees pointed out, there will always be a certain part of the population that is not willing to actively participate in a CS, especially in the early stages of the transformation (N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023; A. Parry, personal communication, 5 May 2023). What is important, however, is that everyone should be able to participate if they want to. As one interviewee argued, "[p]articipation is a fundamental value that is not guaranteed for everyone in most current circular economy models." By providing open and easily accessible spaces for participation, a CS therefore aims to create a collaborative and ultimately transformative environment.

6.3.2 Businesses

While a CS is primarily concerned with the equitable downscaling of production and consumption and the improvement of overall well-being, this does not mean that businesses have no longer a role to play. In fact, as several interviewees pointed out, companies continue to generate significant wealth for society and it would be illusory to think that certain consumer goods, such as smartphones, would suddenly become irrelevant (N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023; A. Parry, personal communication, 5 May 2023). However, a CS based on a post-growth economy "would entail a deep reconsideration of the very meaning of doing business, which would have to be recentred around the values of cooperation, care, sharing, community" (Bauwens, 2021, p. 2). As highlighted by one interviewee, this means that "companies have to change the way they produce, the way they organise themselves, and the way they put values in front of their production. [In a CS,] companies have to take responsibility and change the way they produce, the way they manufacture. This is necessary throughout the life cycle of products [...]" (N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023). Another interviewee argued that businesses should focus on alternative sources of revenue that are not directly linked to consumption (A. Parry, personal communication, 5 May 2023).

In general, as emphasised by Bauwens (2021, p. 2), companies in a CS should be committed to maximising "the wellbeing of both humans and non-human life [...] through not only job creation but also community building and empowerment, and consideration for non-human life and its wellbeing." This point was also made by several experts interviewed for this thesis (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023; A. Parry, personal communication, 5 May 2023). As mentioned earlier, this requires a shift to communal or cooperative ownership models that allow for democratic participation in decision-making and equitable redistribution of economic surplus. Other strategies include "[k]eeping business operations small-scale and localized to primarily serve local communities' needs [...], shortening working hours and cutting advertising are other ways to achieve these wellbeing outcomes (Bauwens, 2021, p. 2).

As several interviewees pointed out, such changes in business practices can bring several benefits to companies. On the one hand, as mentioned already, democratic participation in a company's decision-making process has been shown to spur innovation and improve socioenvironmental performance (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; see also Boeger, 2018; Viggiani, 2011). On the other hand, moving towards alternative sources of revenue that are not directly linked to consumption can improve the value creation for companies, as this typically involves longer transactional relationships compared to the linear model (A. Parry, personal communication, 5 May 2023; F. Stähli, personal communication, 17 May 2023). In short, this allows for the creation of business opportunities that are no longer tied to the continued extraction of resources to manufacture new products. As one interviewee highlighted, it would also liberate companies from the need to persuade customers to buy their product again at the end of each life cycle through the means of expensive marketing. Instead, customers would enter into a long-term relationship with the company, creating more value for both parties (F. Stähli, personal communication, 17 May 2023).

6.3.3 State

Finally, the role of the state in a CS is a crucial one. On the one hand, governments should provide the systemic structures to support civic engagement and community-led circular activities. On the other hand, the state should play an active role in fostering the emergence of new values that go beyond the growth-based paradigm of the liberal market system (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; N. Hempel, personal communication, 4 May 2023; A. Parry, personal communication, 5 May 2023). As a first step, governments should therefore ban advertising that reproduces a socially and ecologically destructive value system. As one interviewee pointed out, "[a]dvertisements are perhaps the biggest driver to create this ethos that pushes us to be continuously unsatisfied and needing more material goods to be fulfilled in our lives" (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). The shift to a CS would thus imply a redefinition of value within society, something that degrowth thinkers such as Serge Latouche have also called for (Latouche, 2009b). This means, for example, that a CS promotes sufficiency rather than want, autonomy rather than heteronomy, or care rather than competition (B. Suárez Eiroa, personal communication, 11 May 2023). It would also mean abolishing the hierarchical and competitive systems that still dominate many work or school environments (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023).

In addition, governments should put in place economic regulations and market governance structures that prioritise circular businesses over their non-circular competitors. Bauwens (2021, p. 2), for instance, calls for policies that include "abandoning the blind pursuit of GDP expansion and redefining the measurement of macroeconomic performance based on indicators of social wellbeing and strong environmental sustainability, banning planned obsolescence and making producers fully responsible for the end-of-life of the products they launch." Hofmann (2022, p. 2) adds to this by underlining the need for "selective (de-)growth, in which policy decisions are made democratically about which industry sectors need to degrow

and which markets must become dominant." He points to the example of the German 'Energiewende', which is the democratically legitimised energy transition in Germany. This initiative involved the phasing out of nuclear power and certain fossil fuel infrastructure, while promoting the development of new business models based on democratic principles (e.g., energy cooperatives) to accelerate the energy transition (Hofmann, 2022). Furthermore, several experts highlighted the importance of government spending and public procurement (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023; N. Klein, personal communication, 12 May 2023). As one interviewee argued, "[g]overnment consumption and spending is a huge force at the local, regional, and national level. If government funds were to be channelled to cooperative businesses [...] then all companies that do not follow this model would automatically lose their market share. Hence, it would bring about a democratisation of economic life at the inter-company level" (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023).

Finally, governments should provide universal access to basic services, including transport, education, and health care. At the same time, the state should implement policies that establish a right to repair for consumer goods and increase the transparency of production processes. As mentioned earlier, the EU is currently implementing such approaches, for example through the introduction of DPPs or the legal right to repair for consumers and independent repairers (Sajn, 2022). The reduction of working hours would also play an important role in a CS. As explained by one interviewee, working hours should be significantly reduced "so that we are able to dedicate ourselves to non-consumptive and non-work-related activities. This would allow us to share more [both goods and our time] or have more time to cook our own food instead of relying on highly processed goods that are much damaging to the environment as well as to our own bodies and health. It also allows us to have more time to care for our communities [and] our urban ecosystems [...]" (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). In short, in order for citizens to engage in non-commodified activities, the state must both provide physical space, for example by allocating sites for urban agriculture projects, and allow for the access for all members of society. This change in systemic structures is particularly important as these sharing and community initiatives do not generate profit and would therefore not survive in a competitive market environment. Hence, it is important that in the early stages of the transition, government support allows these communities to flourish and develop (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023).

6.4 Challenges and Critiques

This final section of the analysis addresses some of the challenges and criticisms facing the CS idea. Firstly, the transition to a CS may be hampered by limited acceptance among critical stakeholders such as businesses or governments. As Kirchherr (2022, p. 1) points out, calls for a degrowth-based CS "may alienate practitioners, creating a scholarly community that loses its ability to influence the mainstream." This was also highlighted by some interviewees (A. Parry, personal communication, 5 May 2023; J. Pervan, personal communication, 15 May 2023). Others have underlined that a future social and economic model does not necessarily have to be based on degrowth to respect the planetary boundaries (F. Stähli, personal communication, 17 May 2023). It should be noted, however, that the idea of a CS goes beyond challenging the prevailing premise of boundless economic growth. As I have argued in this thesis, a CS aims to fundamentally disrupt the status quo in terms of power, norms, and politics in order to create more equitable and just societies. While this will certainly create counterpressure from the winners of the current system, it should not be forgotten that the vast majority have much to gain from such a shift.

Secondly, the CS framework could lead to an overestimation of the responsibility of the citizen-consumer. As one interviewee pointed out, "behavioural studies in economics and social science research have found that citizens often have much less agency than we might think. Emphasising the role of citizens could therefore very often be a way of scapegoating the role that businesses and governments play, which is a much more important one" (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). On this point, it should be noted that the primary concern of a CS is the democratisation of economic and political spaces. Thus, while the CS recognises the role of citizens not only as user-consumers, but also as maintainers, repairers, sellers, sharers, or collaborators, it is primarily concerned with changing the systemic conditions in which we are all locked in. By changing the socio-economic structures, "the citizen might have a different role, a different way of life, a different form of living" (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023).

Finally, some critics have argued that the idea of a CS responds mainly to the concerns of wealthy countries in the Global North and is rooted in visions of Eurocentrism (Akbulut, 2021). As one interviewee argued, poorer countries or less affluent members of society are likely to have more immediate concerns than engaging in activities such as repairing or sharing (A. Parry, personal communication, 5 May 2023). However, while it is true that these populations need to be provided with novel circular solutions that are physically available to them, it is important to remember that they are often the ones who are already most engaged in circular activities (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). Moreover, as I have argued before, the aim of a CS is to reduce inequalities (both within and between countries) and to enable a higher standard of living for all members of society in a way that respects the planetary boundaries. A CS therefore seeks to include other concepts and ideas that share similar concerns (M. Calisto Friant, personal communication, 5 May 2023). In other words, rather than positioning a degrowth-based CS "as the vision to dominate all others, [it] is seen as one among numerous worldviews and understandings of living well—such as Buen Vivir (or Sumak Kawsay), Ubuntu, or Ecological Swaraj—that express ideas parallel to degrowth in different terms" (Akbulut, 2021, p. 100). Ultimately, these approaches all share the same purpose: to achieve a holistic and sustainable way of life that prioritises the well-being of all forms of life, including humans and nature.

VII Conclusion

As this master thesis has argued, most of today's CE approaches are centred around ecomodernist visions of the future and are based on technocratic and depoliticised processes. Indeed, previous research has shown that current CE models predominantly revolve around ideas related to waste management, resource efficiency, or the looping of material, energy, and waste flows (Blomsma and Brennan, 2017; Geisendorf & Pietrulla, 2018). Hence, although the CE is considered by many to be a critical strategy for achieving the global sustainable development agenda, critics have argued that the concept is virtually silent on its social implications. As Calisto Friant et al. (2023, p. 2) point out, mainstream CE propositions "do not address crucial sustainability implications of CE, such as how the benefits and costs of a CE transition are distributed, who controls CE technologies and patents, who decides on the shape, form, and policies for a CE transition, and what are the overall social and environmental impacts of CE proposals." Furthermore, others have underlined that the role of citizens within the CE remains underdeveloped. In most cases, citizens are portrayed as passive consumers or users who simply have to accept or reject new circular business models (Hobson & Lynch, 2016). In light of these shortcomings, the CE has come under increasing scrutiny, as it has been argued that it leads to 'green business as usual' and does not go beyond the modus operandi of consumerism (Hobson, 2021). As I have argued in this paper, a different approach is therefore needed, one that can transform the prevailing economic system while creating new social norms and practices.

Against this background, this thesis explored the idea of a circular society and discussed the role of citizens, businesses, and the state in such a model. Contrary to the CE, I argued that a CS aims to achieve a broader socio-ecological transformation that fundamentally disrupts the status quo in terms of power, norms, and politics. At the same time, a CS aims to re-embed the economy within the broader social and ecological spheres in order to enable a system that can operate within the planetary boundaries. To achieve this goal, the CS concept calls for a reorganisation of current forms of consumption and production to establish a new social and economic model based on a reformed set of principles such as conviviality, sharing, and care (Hofmann et al., 2018). The idea of a CS is therefore in line with degrowth theory which demands a "reorientation of economic relations toward a different structure, along different principles, in order to serve different functions" (Akbulut, 2021, p. 99). More specifically, I have argued that a CS embraces the idea of 'selective degrowth' and follows Serge Latouche's call to "decolonise the imaginary." Based on these considerations, I have defined the CS as the

replacement of the linear, non-transparent, and inequitable economic system with a democratic, transparent, and cooperatively organised economic system that fosters autonomy, justice, solidarity, participation, conviviality, sharing, and care and allows to keep human society within ecological limits in a fair, equitable, and sustainable way.

Regarding the implementation of a CS, I have argued that a CS must be based on three main pillars. The first and most important pillar is the democratisation of the economic and political spheres. Increased democratisation could take the form of citizens' assemblies composed of randomly selected individuals, as well as worker-owned or self-managed enterprises and cooperatives. As I have argued, increased democratisation is the foundation of a CS, as it allows to disentangle conflicting interests and distributes economic and political power more equally. Linked to the democratisation of the economic and political spheres, the second pillar consists of expanding participation opportunities in order to mobilise and empower citizens and small-scale communities. As I have discussed, the expansion of participation opportunities creates space for communality, collaboration and solidarity, which are the core values and central logic of economic action in a CS. A CS would therefore be oriented towards community-based organisational forms such as cooperatives, community energy groups, or repair cafés. Most importantly, the goal of these communities would no longer be profit maximisation, but social and ecological impact. As Hofmann et al. (2018, p. 225) puts it, the CS thus allows to create "free and experimental spaces that promote innovativeness and creativity beyond the classic logic of economic exploitation [...]." Finally, the third pillar of a CS is the principle of openness and transparency. On the one hand, this means that production, consumption, and decision-making spaces are open and accessible for all members of society. On the other hand, it also implies that information and knowledge are made commonly available.

Finally, I have discussed the role of the main stakeholders in a CS, i.e., the state, businesses, and citizens. While current CE models are predominantly centred on private companies operating within a capitalist and market-based logic, I have argued that a CS puts citizens and communities at the centre of its concerns. Consequently, the role of citizens is a much more active one than in current CE approaches. On the one hand, a CS promotes opportunities for citizens to engage in non-commodified activities such as repairing or sharing. On the other hand, citizens play an important role in building bottom-up pressure to change the political environment. Businesses, for their part, should be encouraged to maximise the well-being of both human and non-human life. The role of companies in a CS should thus shift from profit maximisation to community building and empowerment, the creation of meaningful

employment opportunities as well as the improvement of their socio-environmental performance. Finally, the role of the state is to provide systemic structures that support civic engagement as well as market governance structures that encourage the emergence of an economy that is not only more circular, but also more democratic and inclusive.

While the CS framework offers a valuable approach to shifting the current CE narrative towards a stronger sustainability agenda that includes social justice, there are still a number of challenges to overcome. Future research should therefore focus, for example, on the feasibility and effectiveness of implementing a CS model in different contexts. This could include, for example, the development of case studies to evaluate existing initiatives, or the design and implementation of pilot projects to test the practicality of the proposed pillars and principles. In addition, further research is necessary to explore the governance mechanisms and policy frameworks that would be required to support the transition to a CS. At the same time, the social and economic impacts of a CS on different stakeholders, including citizens, businesses and communities, need to be better understood. Future research could, for example, analyse the redistributive effects of democratisation, the potential for job creation and sustainable livelihoods, and the overall well-being of individuals and communities within a CS. Finally, there is a need to broaden the scope of research to include perspectives from different regions and countries. Future studies should also analyse the applicability and adaptation of CS principles in diverse socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts, considering the specific challenges and opportunities each context presents. In conclusion, in a world of increasing resource scarcity, aggravating climate change and growing inequalities, the CS provides a valuable framework to achieve an inclusive socio-economic transformation that allows for the creation of an economic system that operates within the limits of the planetary boundaries.

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Appendix

A.	Com	prehe	nsive	List	of	Interviews

Nr.	Date	Name	Institution/Company	Position	Sector	Other relevant
						experience
1	04.05.2023	Nadja	Hans Sauer Stiftung	Project Manager	Civil	N/A
		Hempel		& Researcher	society	
2	05.05.2023	Arthur Parry	Fundatio Consulting	Founder	Business	N/A
3	05.05.2023	Martin	Autonomous	Postdoctoral	Academia	PhD Researcher,
		Calisto	University of	Researcher		specialising on
		Friant	Barcelona			discourses on circular
						economy and its key
						challenges at Utrecht
						University
4	11.05.2023	Brais Suárez	University of Vigo	Postdoctoral	Academia	N/A
		Eiroa		Researcher		
5	11.05.2023	Tom Koch	Rytec Switzerland	Co-Head of	Business	Executive Committee
				Circular		Member at Circular
				Economy		Economy Switzerland
6	12.05.2023	Natacha	Maneco	Sustainability	Business	PhD Researcher,
		Klein		Consultant		specialising in
						circularity in public
						sector organisations at
						Nova University Lisbon
7	15.05.2023	Josip Pervan	World Business	Senior Manager,	Business	Project Consultant on
			Council for	Policy, Advocacy		Trade and Circular
			Sustainable	& Member		Economy at United
			Development	Mobilization		Nations Economic
			(WBCSD)			Commission for Europe
8	17.05.2023	Felix Stähli	Impact Hub Geneva	Co-Founder	Civil	Executive Committee
			& Lausanne		society	Member at Circular
						Economy Switzerland

B. Interview Transcripts

For confidentiality reasons, the interview transcripts are not included in the public version of this thesis.