



# Against wasted politics: A critique of the circular economy

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## abstract

The discourse of zero-waste and the circular economy has been championed by key players, such as the European Commission, management consultancies, NGOs, academics and multinational companies, in recent years. Given the all too obvious social and environmental crises associated with out-of-bounds growth capitalism, the circular economy has been one of the main references for rebuilding and reforming a political economy of sustainable growth. In this paper we detect a de-politicizing strategy in this attempt of reform, and, consequently, aim at re-locating a position for the politicization of growth-driven capitalism and the circular economy. We do this by offering a unique discursive-material theoretical framework, bringing together Marxist and Lacanian psychoanalytic readings. This will allow understanding both the subjective relation with the meaning of waste and the material exchanges that place the subject in the position to produce and consume waste as a valuable commodity. In our quest to (re-)politicize waste, we offer three practical steps that aim at interrupting the endless repetition of waste, which include attempts to eradicate it. This argument will be illustrated by making reference to the circular strategies of Apple Inc., the world's largest and most iconic consumer electronics company.

It's a true story ... being a young intellectual, I wanted desperately to get away, see something different ... I was on a small boat ... the fishermen went out in their frail crafts at their own risk. It was this risk, this danger, which I loved to share ... One day, then, as we were waiting for the moment to pull in the nets, a fisherman known as Petit-Jean ... pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can. It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry [in developing Brittany], which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me – You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you! (Lacan, 1998: 95)

## Introduction

Calls for mobilizing a post-growth economy can be increasingly heard in the public sphere these days. The economic drive for growth, experts have been telling us (Alexander, 2012; Jackson, 2011; Meadows, et al., 1972), is associated with alarming symptoms of environmental destruction and socio-psychological demise, ranging from wage stagnation and the rise of inequality to increased dissatisfaction and depression, and, of course, global warming. Such claims have motivated peer-reviewed publications (e.g. Schneider et al., 2010) and public manifestos demanding a transition towards a healthier and more equal society, free of the unforgiving imperatives of competitive capitalism (Gordon and Rosenthal, 2003) and its inadequate measures to estimate, and even less reflect upon, what really matters for humanity in social, environmental and moral terms (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Moreover and crucially, pro-growth discourse does not acknowledge the public health and environmental crises Planet Earth is facing (Hidaka, 2012; Rockström et al., 2009), caused, in large parts, by capitalist expansion (Harvey, 2014).

The post-growth project finds its legitimacy in the need to urgently address these crises as a political problem. Post-growth politics aim not only at disrupting the power relations that will make up the future economy; they also seek to expose and contest the futility of the cultural ideology of capitalist growth (Sennett, 1999). This implies denouncing how capitalism feeds from the promises of ever-developing, cosmopolitan social geographies, while hiding an overexploited, 'necropolitan' space where agonizing peoples dwell (McIntyre and Nast, 2011).

Certainly, this is a political struggle that has not and will not be easy. Yet, the utmost difficulty does not seem to lie in the inconsistency of narratives (and policies) proposing alternatives to growth-driven capitalism (e.g. Spangenberg, 2010), as some authors have suggested (Berg and Hukkinen, 2011; van den Bergh, 2011). Interestingly, beyond such expectable strains, the real problem appears to be found in the spectacular grip that narratives and cultural elements insisting on capitalist growth have increasingly shown over working and consuming subjects, preventing their identification with an active and critical political stance (Swyngedouw, 2009; Žižek and Hanlon, 2001).

Ideals of growth have not only been defined publicly as the sole 'safe place' during economic crises; they have also infiltrated and absorbed representations that stand against its implications, naturalizing the premise of permanent growth and celebrating it as a kind of Fukuyamean 'end of history' for socioeconomic governance, psycho-social development and environmental fostering (Easterlin, 2005; Levy, 2014; Velasquez-Brust and Sarkis, 2012). Chief among such de-

politicizations has been the discourse of ‘sustainability’. Once a radical condemnation of the un-sustainability of capitalism (Meadows, et al., 1972), the notion of ‘sustainable growth’ now promotes ‘more of the same rather than a radical departure from economic growth as the top policy objective’ (Victor, 2008: 19). Sustainability is driven to its logical conclusion when it is turned into the fetishized content of so-called ‘green’ and ‘ethical’ commodities and thus into the essential part of the discourse (and practice) through which the capitalist political economy organizes and legitimizes itself (Cremin, 2012).

As Marx foresaw, our capacity for critique can only get stunted when socio-environmental spoilage is fetishized, that is to say, when it gets sublimated into desirable images and exchangeable values before our eyes (Böhm and Batta, 2010; Böhm et al., 2012). Consequently, going against the current, this paper aims at re-locating a position for the politicization of growth-driven capitalism *vis-à-vis* the latest and most sophisticated version of the ‘sustainable’ fetishized commodity: the ‘zero-waste’ value chain and the general project of the ‘circular economy’ it promises to realize.

The latter is part of a recently developed discourse, endorsed by renowned international institutions such as the European Commission (2014) and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (Webster, 2015), which promotes the sustainable growth of the global economy through the achievement of waste suppression in all stages of productive and consumptive activity. This project aims further than just recycling, by assuming the possibility of engineering a nature-like, ever-replenishing growth without any residues (nor losses). Such ideal of ‘circularity’, which wasteless-ness management could realize, is the imaginary the paper intends to problematize. Why? Because the harmony it upholds veils, as a fetishist fantasy, the possibility of politicizing the rules of a capitalist economy and of preventing the unsustainable human and environmental wastings the latter cannot help but multiply (Gidwani, 2013; Žižek, 2013).

The practices of ‘circular-certified’ company Apple Inc., which this paper will discuss in its final section, can be briefly mentioned here as an example of this. In particular, we focus on how zero-waste practices can divert our attention from the planned obsolescence that has been built into the production and marketing of products devised by companies like Apple (Herod et al., 2013). Quite simply, as the Apple brand proudly displays its achievements in complying with design-for-recycling standards of production (Underwriters Laboratory, 2016), the public turns oblivious of the environmental consequences of Apple’s competitive business strategy, which seeks for consumers to dispose of old versions of Apple products in favour of new releases as quickly as possible. When the feeling of an iPhone turning ‘old and slow’ is combined with the feeling of an iPhone being

circular or ‘green by design’, any critical, politicizing impulse in the environment-wary consumer gets repressed by the intense want for the newest iProduct. This is because the marketing of the circular leads the consumer to conceive the purchase of Apple commodities as the perfect antidote against Apple’s own wasteful logic. As a result, of course, the manufacture of iProducts becomes more relentless than ever.

In light of this dynamic, assuming that the general discourse of sustainability has become the de-politicized safe-conduct for wasteful growth to be established as the sole socio-economic programme, our purpose is to evaluate the underpinnings of the ‘zero-waste-circular-economy’ (ZWCE) discourse as the new dominant narrative of sustainability; a fetishizing narrative within a capitalist order.

This move towards (re)politicization, of course, will require this paper to rely on some counter-intuitive facts of waste under the political economy of contemporary capitalism. First, the fact that waste will keep increasing exponentially, faster than our capacity to handle it (Hoornweg et al., 2015). Second, the fact that the organization of waste management value chains cannot suppress the wasted, but only transpose it to marginalized territories (Gidwani and Reddy, 2011; Gregson et al., 2010). Third, the fact that the offering of ‘green’ sustainable commodities, now endowed with a ‘zero-waste’ gloss, results paradoxically in the arousal of a fetishistic desire to consume them more intensely and thus to keep up the wasting of their leftover parts. This ensues from the guilt the consumption of such waste-less commodities immediately atones for the sustainability-wary subject (Jones, 2010). Overall, by inquiring over the fetishization of the ‘circular’ commodity and the de-politicizing effects of it, we seek at the same time to take an ethical stance in relation to the idea of waste and its production. We propose that wasting should not be conceived normatively as a mistake that ought to be fixed using the ‘leaning’ means of capitalism, so that the latter ends up being championed once again (e.g. Dhingra et al., 2014). Instead, we affirm that waste should be conceptualized critically, as the inherent by-product of a regime that thrives on the excessive exploitation of labour and the environment (Yates, 2011), and whose rationalized systems work, as Hardin (1968) points out, to literally dump the residues of private enterprise into the public sphere of the commons.

In what follows, we hope to contribute a layered conceptual framework to reclaim the lost critical edge of the discourse on sustainability and the post-growth agenda. In consequence, with this we seek to foster the devising of political interventions disruptive of an unsustainable socioeconomic order. The first half of the argument will depict the ‘circular economy’ programme and then put its

de-politicizing ‘zero-waste sustainability’ claims, for the sake of perpetual growth, into question. This will be done by establishing a contrast similar to the one recently promoted by Sum and Jessop (2013), in which the possibility of a middle ground for (re)politicizing ‘wasteful unsustainability’ is looked for between semioticist interpretations of political discourse (e.g. Barnes and Hoerber, 2013) and Marxist, materialist critiques of capitalist surplus-value generation (e.g. Harvey, 2014; Yates, 2011). The second half of the argument will turn to Lacanian psychoanalytic readings (Cederström and Spicer, 2014; Cremin, 2012; Lacan, 2007) to account for engagements with de-politicization that consider both discursivity and surplus-value generation to be involved in a single kind of socio-economic subjectivity, fetishistically driven to the fantasy promised by the now waste-less sustainable commodity. As briefly elaborated above, the interruption of such phantasmatic relation, which we believe could lead to the re-politicization of the general sustainability project, will be discussed in relation to the example of a ‘circular’ company in the high-end electronics business: Apple Inc.

### **Waste management and the ‘zero-waste circular economy’ (ZWCE)**

We begin by acknowledging how ideals of growth have assumed the command of the discourse of sustainability. If we consider ‘The limits to growth’ report, outlined as early as in 1972 (Meadows et al., 1972), we can see how the concept of sustainability was originally brought to light to stand against the ‘growth’ doctrine of capitalism and the over-consumption of natural resources the latter called for (Kidd, 1992). Originally, the narrative on sustainability arose as a response to evidences of the pernicious social and environmental effects of globalized industrialization and the lack of regulation within thriving neoliberal economic policies (Crouch, 2012; Shamsul Haque, 1999). In this sense, sustainability implied a negative status, as it was really about declaring unsustainability as a fact ignored by advocates of economic growth. Forty years on, however, the term ‘sustainability’ has been captured by politico-economic elites claiming that rapid economic growth can be achieved in a way that manages to remain responsible to environment and society (Magretta, 1997). This implies the positivization of a formerly negative concept. As a recent report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has corroborated, the ideal of sustainability no longer denounces the negative lack of responsibility in earth-depleting growth logics (i.e. un-sustainability) but rather signals the positive construction of a ‘green economy’, based on morally-oriented socioeconomic measures and policies capable of delivering a ‘green development’ solution (see also Fay, 2012).

As Dauvergne and Lister indicate (2013), this dramatic turn in the debate on sustainability, culminating in the normalization of notions like 'green growth', has been championed by leading-brand companies (like Apple Inc.), as part of an integral strategic effort that goes beyond mere greenwashing and reputation-saving initiatives. According to these authors, the notion of sustainability has been appropriated by the logic of 'eco-business', a mode of enterprise that strives to produce and brand sustainable goods and services/practices in order to help companies secure 'competitive advantage and increase sales and profit' and generally 'enhance their growth and control within the [crisis-prone] global economy' (Dauvergne and Lister, 2013: 1). From this perspective, sustainability can be seen not only as a marketing plan devised by companies to appease the socio-environmental concerns of stakeholders, but also as a crucial business driver, and thus, as an operational challenge proper, particularly in terms of supply chain and resource efficiency management (Dauvergne and Lister, 2013; Seuring et al., 2008). In simpler terms, producing sustainable goods and services makes leading-brand companies not only look good but at the same time helps them grow by expanding their capacity to compete, negotiate and survive.

It is precisely this newly forged link between sustainability and enterprise, sitting at the heart of eco-business, which leads us to focus our attention to the crucial problem of waste. This is because the latter has come to stand as the main cause mobilizing both the marketing and operational departments of companies to which sustainability is paramount. Following the conceptual transition we have proposed above, from negative renditions of sustainability to positive ones, waste can be seen as embodying the negative side of sustainability that eco-business managers strive to positivize, as it represents to them what has not yet been actively managed in marketing and operational terms. The reality of waste produced by eco-businesses, as perceived by consumers, employees and stakeholders through the media or more direct means, shows an eco-brand that is not yet green enough, and reveals an organization of the eco-supply-chain that is not efficient enough yet.

In this sense, waste management and recycling capabilities become the most important assets to be managed, as they allow companies to enact and display a direct impact over the clearest traces of their un-sustainability. This perceivable impact of responsible, green and efficient practices over produced waste gets consolidated further by the consumers' perception of their own personal, domestic experience with the management of waste, a perception that companies invest heavily to bolster through the means of advertisement (e.g. Barr, 2003; Kotler, 2011). Consequently, from a broader perspective, the practice of waste management can be seen as serving to sublate the negative connotations of the economic growth-sustainability link into a positive business dynamic, and thus,

to legitimize the sustainable growth programme for both companies and consumers. On the one hand, when something is wasted after a process of production, distribution and/or consumption, such act cannot help but to be appreciated as unsustainable, damaging and flagrantly immoral. On the other hand, after these acts of wasting are defined as reproachable, they get almost immediately re-appraised as valuable by both consumers and producers. Here the notion of value should be understood in both economic-material and ethical terms. The appearance of the wasted serves to foster socio-environmental values that promote steering the world back to a sustainable status. And this is a process that ought to be conducted through making good business, an endeavour that calls, in turn, for effective market valuation of the wasted. This is what the well-known case of carbon offsetting illustrates clearly vis-a-vis the wasted environment (Böhm and Dabhi, 2009).

In short, sustainable growth can be best sold when its procedures demonstrate to be valuable, and waste, however excessive, serves as the perfect object of that valuation. Such an insight helps explain why the desire for consumption does not diminish but increases when recycling systems are offered to subjects, as experimental psychologists Catlin and Wang have recently discovered (2013). Waste is no longer signified as the trace of unsustainability, but rather as the object of manageable sustainability, an institution whose practices the subject feels compelled to purchase and help grow (Corvellec, 2014).

Having considered the role of waste and waste management, it is crucial to appreciate how the newly emergent discourse on the ‘zero-waste circular economy’ (ZWCE) has begun conveying, like no other concept, the positivized waste management logic underpinning the sustainable growth programme. The idea of ZWCE has been promoted heavily in recent years as the main reference for building and reforming a political economy of sustainable growth. It has been championed by governmental institutions like the European Commission (European Commission, 2014), in charge of piloting cross-European law and policy making, and by prestigious international NGOs like the Ellen McArthur Foundation (Webster, 2015), which has created a business platform integrating more than a hundred of the world’s leading multinational companies with top consulting actors like McKinsey and Co. and top class universities. Essentially, what these global efforts towards the ZWCE endorse is the most sophisticated version of the ‘resource efficiency’ agenda supported by United Nations and the European Commission (European Commission, 2014; UNEP, 2011).

The intended sophistication of the ZWCE is introduced when the engineering to optimize the use of resources is no longer defined as a local, linear input-output intervention but rather as a worldview that assimilates economic activity to the

ever-springing life cycle of nature, where all things are said to be born to inter-act without any wastage (Benyus, 2002; Porritt, 2007). This is the so-called ‘zero-waste’ ideal at the center of all circular economy initiatives and policies, a system in which

what used to be regarded as ‘waste’ can be turned into a resource ... [one that can be] best understood by looking into natural, living systems that function optimally because each of their components fits into the whole. Products are intentionally designed to fit into material cycles, and as a result materials flow in a way that keeps the value added for as long as possible – and residual waste is close to zero. (European Commission, 2014)

This recent proposition entails a leap forward in terms of the socio-economic understanding of waste and its management, which aims to go beyond the promotion of practices of recycling, displacing, transforming or offsetting. As a framework, the ZWCE is ultimately about radically altering the logic of business at both the consumer and producer ends, so that all significant wastage gets eradicated for good in all steps of the value chain, at industrial and urban levels (Curran and Williams, 2012; Zaman and Lehmann, 2011).

Crucially, what these ‘zero-waste’ goals amount to is the definitive consolidation of the abovementioned link between sustainability and growth, originally enacted by recycling practices. According to sustainability-wary scholars Zaman and Lehmann (2011), the notion of ‘zero-waste’ represents the latest, most accomplished wave of innovation in waste management systems: a synergy of design and production systems that is able to achieve 100% recycling or resource recovery and prompt real changes in consumption behaviours, in the direction of sustainability. Yet, it is the notion of circularity, promoted by leading-brand eco-companies (like Apple Inc.) in conjunction with global institutions of policy-making reach (like the European Union), which really pushes for the seamless conceptual amalgamation between sustainability and growth, because of its focus on re-positioning the socio-materiality of waste as an ‘optimization business’ (Hultman and Corvellec, 2012). The ‘circular’ in the ZWCE project posits a universal, transcendental connection between the laws of nature and the capitalist economy, in relation to which waste is defined as a particular exception, a mistake of perception and operational implementation that can be dealt with by deploying a different, more sophisticated business strategy.

## The de-politicization of growth capitalism through the ZWCE

A specific question emerges out of the abovementioned insights on the ZWCE: how exactly is the amalgamation of ‘sustainability’ and ‘economic growth’ being instituted? What exactly accounts for the consolidation of this link?

A sustainable kind of growth is assured by the new concept of a ZWCE because the latter purifies the perceived connection between waste and unsustainability from all traces of ambivalence. Waste (or lack thereof, to be precise) has now become absolutely constructive of a prosperous and sustainable socioeconomic future, because it is no longer conceived in terms of compensating a loss, as it was with recycling, but rather in terms of ‘not losing’ or ‘losing loss’ altogether. An American NGO expresses this crucial shift by evaluating the notion of a ‘broken process’:

[We have] a clear and simple vision: a prosperous and inclusive future without waste ... [This is] not just a dream; it's a necessity. Waste reduces the effectiveness of our businesses, increases pressures on the natural environment and harms the vitality of our communities. It does not have to be this way; waste is the result of a broken process. Fortunately, this is a process that can be fixed. (Zero Waste Alliance, 2014)

From the ‘zero-waste’ perspective, the ‘breaking’ that any waste/wasting represents no longer makes a reference to the damages that growth has inflicted over society or nature. Quite the opposite, it now refers to the entropies and failures on the waste management value chains that have been already assumed as perfectly capable of delivering inclusive and circular sustainable growth, if handled properly. As previously proposed, nature is conceived by ZCWE champions as working in virtually the same way the economy works and in that sense the focus of more efficient re-valuation is now mostly placed on waste management as a business object, not on the excess of waste (Braungart and McDonough, 2009; Corvellec, 2014).

Regardless of the vehicle it takes, such evolution allows a decisive purification of the idea of growth by dissociating it from its deductible wastes. This results from the scientific plausibility of devising and engineering wasteless businesses (Braungart and McDonough, 2009), and more importantly, to the conviction of performing an all-encompassing capitalization of nature to manage socio-environmental sustainability according to business logics (European Commission, 2014; see also Hawken et al., 2010; Hawken, 2010). If growth is now able to become flawlessly circular and absolutely benign (i.e. sustainable), it is because waste (or lack thereof, ‘zero-waste’) can be calculated with absolute certainty as valuable. It expresses the rationale of capitalism as applied to optimize itself in self-referential fashion, that is, to assign economic value not only to the wastings of nature (i.e. the former recycling logic) but also to the ‘wastes’ or mistakes of the process of waste valuation itself, as it is being implemented (i.e. the new ‘circular’ logic).

All of these insights on the re-conceptualization of waste, showing the emergence of circularity ideals, have elucidated for us a fundamental consequence: the de-politicization of the discourse on (and against) the unsustainability of capitalism (Straume and Humphrey, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2010). Firstly, the new framework insists on considering the discussion around different organizations of sustainability, particularly the ones that highlight alternatives to unsustainable growth, not as a part of a political arena (e.g. Blühdorn and Welsh, 2008) but as an effort of gauging a management and governance/policy problem (e.g. Gladwin et al., 1995; Sekulova et al., 2013; Starik and Kanashiro, 2013). This constitutes a reduction in which ultimately only a kind of simulated politics can take place between pro-consensus institutions (Blühdorn, 2004; see also Rancière, 1998). Secondly, delving deeper into such defusing of political antagonism, the ‘circular economy’ programme can be seen as promoting a kind of populism of external elements (instead of the inner shortcomings and conflicts of the economy) as the way to secure a sustainable future amidst so called ‘apocalyptic’ conditions (Swyngedouw, 2009). Elaborating on Swyngedouw’s (2010) ideas, in the case of the ‘circularity’ imaginary such externalization can be understood as an elaboration on nature that is concerned both with the technical intervention and re-design of nature to fit circular productivity and with the more limited intervention on nature guided through mimicking its ‘zero-waste’ metabolisms (e.g. Sorman and Giampietro, 2013).

At this point, we must return to our original concerns and ask: is the consensus on the ZWCE along with its ‘economic naturalism’ claims really the end of the political history of sustainability as an economic programme for growth’s sake? Is there room to reactivate political antagonisms around growth that could lead to empowering the demand for its exhaustion? In the following section we will turn to political discourse theories in search for resources to answer these questions and assess the potential disruption of the circular economy imaginary, focused on the ideal of a ‘zero-waste’ future.

### ‘Zero-waste’ as empty discursive frame: An insufficient critique

For many authors, the de-politicization of the notion of sustainability – in other words, the naturalization of sustainable growth – is a problem that can only be tackled by analyzing the way the current political economy is inter-subjectively and contingently constructed through discourse (e.g. Alexander, 2009; Coffey, 2016; Jessop, 2012; Stavrakakis, 2000; Swyngedouw, 2009). Politico-discursive approaches agree on going beyond positivist, behaviourist or essentialist readings of the social in order to understand the political as the fundamental tension

mobilizing (i.e. determining) the consolidation of any taken-for-granted environmental and socio-economic normality under capitalism (Cederström and Spicer, 2014; Gibson-Graham et al., 2001; Springer, 2012; see also Cowie, 2011; Goldman, 2001). Such a reading would render the political economy of ZWCE a practically-enacted set of representations/signifiers whose rule of composition (i.e. power and/or knowledge) and subjective endorsements (i.e. identification) can be re-articulated.

One particularly relevant discursive approach, with a strong scientific basis in the fields of linguistics and cognitive psychology, can be recognized in the work of George Lakoff (2004, 2010). He has argued against the naivety of thinking that the mere publicizing of critical truths about un-sustainability would compel subjects to think beyond the pro-growth conservative establishment. In fact, he explains, speaking against a dominant discourse would only lead to its strengthening, because of how the unconscious meta-interpretation of meaning is rooted in cognitive frames. If the request to negate the meaning of a representation is being framed in the terms that legitimize that representation as a ‘real’ and positive thing, the effort of negating will consolidate the frame (Lakoff, 2004, 2010). Following this theory, both the astuteness of ‘sustainable growth’ and ‘zero-waste’ initiatives and the ingenuousness of straightforward ‘post-growth’, ‘de-growth’ or ‘a-growth’ positions (van der Bergh and Kallis, 2012) can be revealed: they end up working, respectively, to ‘negatively affirm’ and to ‘not negate’ the de-politicized frame of capitalism, which endorses perpetual growing and wasting.

Lakoff (2010) demonstrates that elaborating a critique in terms of the dominant wasteful-growth-frame only leads to what he calls ‘environmental hypocrisies’ or lack of real alternative thinking. Accordingly, he affirms that the right way to re-activate politics (i.e. the struggle to institute meanings about the social) would be to tailor new and distinct counter-frames on waste and sustainability for subjects to identify with. This customization would not only imply moving away from the poll-based, consensus-seeking, rational-rhetorical approaches (e.g. Brulle, 2002) that ‘policy wonks’ often promote (Lakoff, 2004). Challenging common sense, it would also require detaching from any narrative/frames on positive ‘environmental action’ promoting ‘zero-waste circularity’, so that political discourse could address the real problem behind unsustainability: the global propagation of a ‘let-the-market-decide ideology, in which the market is both natural and moral’ (Lakoff, 2010: 74).

A different proposition can be found in the work of Barnes and Hoerber (2013). Drawing from Laclau and Mouffe’s post-structuralist brand of political discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001), they have come to understand the

abovementioned dynamic of discursive framing in terms of a constant reconstruction of the boundaries that regulate the semiotic field where the discourse on 'sustainability' unfolds (also as practice). Their particular interest is directed upon the function of a paradoxical 'floating signifier' or 'nodal point' within discourse: a singular representation which serves to institute or 'frame' meanings of universal reach, hegemonic dominance and a naturalized feel, but whose closure or fixity remains at the same time 'lacking' or 'empty'. This implies that it is not the particular content of a signifier that matters, but rather, its filling-function or their capacity to attract and organize different strands of filling-content. The best examples in this context can be found in representations that are as all-encompassing as they are contestable, like the notions of 'climate change' (Mehtmann, 2010), 'environment' (Fontenelle, 2013) and, of course, 'sustainable development' (Gunder and Hillier, 2009).

Extending Lakoff's (2010) understanding of political discourse analysis, this perspective allows a sharper critique of de-politicized 'frames' by showing how the efficacy of new framings can only exist within a field where antagonistic positions are disclosed and set to confront each other, as a consequence of the 'productive failure' of any new 'nodal frame' in fully hegemonizing (Žižek, 2006). Politicization in this sense is not only conceived as a rhetorical strategy against what seems 'all too equivalent' but also as the inclusion of the demands that governments, NGOs, social movements and other political actors make to particular political others in relation to 'nodal' points, pushing for diversity (differentiation) and resistance (antagonization) (Barnes and Hoerber, 2013; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). By assuming the efficacy of empty 'nodal frames' as 'undecidable', always available to be contested, this reading of politics-as-discursivity promotes a permanent democratic struggle that subverts any 'normalizing' identity/imaginary that could grant a de-politicizing regulation of inter-subjective social practice (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; see also Mouffe, 2005).

In sum, what both these approaches propose is that the critique of the de-politicizing discourse on the ZWCE requires re-composing 'nodal' metaphors of the sustainability discourse that have come to be perceived as righteous in their pro-growth claims for 'the reconciliation of economic and environmental demands' (Barnes and Hoerber, 2013: 15; Fontenelle, 2013).

This effort, which ultimately aims at mastering a new way to impact practical reality by modifying its discursive boundaries, calls for a strategic intervention over the discursive field where the notion of waste management acquires its de-politicizing meaning, in relation to a whole network of significations. Specifically, it must seek to 'unlock' or 'liberate' the overly fixed, antagonistic position that waste management has been set to occupy within the discursive

field (for instance, as the ideal opposite of ‘inefficient development’) by affirming an alternative way of articulating its meaning(s). Such an intervention is seen as the explicit enactment of the inherently contingent contest about how exactly to construct reality discursively; in this case, the reality of waste in relation to sustainability, particularly considering how ‘the meaning of waste may be changed as waste becomes recognized as a tradeable commodity with economic value’ (Barnes and Hoerber, 2013: 7). Following this path, the abovementioned approaches render the analysis of discursivity both a quest for new politicizing meanings, and a politicizing act in its own right. They aim at providing a cognitive and semiotic toolkit to disrupt and re-construct the processes of identification and meaning-making through which the subject makes his/her own social emplacement intelligible in relation to the new ‘empty framings’ of ‘sustainable growth’.

However, despite of the contributions presented above, it is crucial to note how this resolute trust on the possibilities of discursivity fails to take into account two important aspects for our inquiry. First, following Sum and Jessop (2001: 92), the ‘exorbitation of language’ in discourse analysis, which ‘analyzes all social relations in terms of a metaphor of language’ – and which we think also complements Lakoff’s insights on the subject’s adherence to the language of metaphors – prevents the subject from transcending the distinction between action and language (with the latter subsuming the former). This kind of mono-disciplinary imperialism thwarts the exploring of the ‘complex discursive-material nature of practices, organizations and institutions’ (Sum and Jessop, 2001: 92; see also Geras, 1988) that compose growth-driven capitalism; in this case, the material implementation of (zero) waste management. Second, the focus on the meaning of ‘zero-waste’ as it becomes commodified (Barnes and Hoerber, 2013: 7) misses a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the growth-logic of capitalism and the socio-environmental crises it generates. This is because neither the ‘re-usable waste’ nor the idealized ‘zero-waste’ commodity can emerge without the human wasting generated by the production of economic value through labour, or the ‘objectual’ waste (e.g. pollution) that results from the process of optimizing value production by exploiting labour, so that accumulable wealth can be created (i.e. ‘stuff’) (Yates, 2011: 1690).

Although the analysis of discursivity and subjectivity are crucial for countering de-politicization, such strategic effort will prove ineffective if it fails to consider the material trajectories and exchanges that account for the (by)production and the imagined suppression of wasting. Without the latter, politics can only aspire to the ‘strange ahistorical flavour ... [of the] endless performative games of an eternal present’ (Žižek, 2013: 31), which in a way is precisely what re-cycling is all about: a performance for the eternal presence of commodity value. In the next

section, as a response, we will bring together Marxist and Lacanian psychoanalytic readings to provide a discursive-material framework. This will allow understanding both the subjective relation with the meaning of waste (or lack thereof, 'zero-waste') and the material exchanges that place the subject in the position to produce and consume waste as a valuable commodity (or refrain from doing it).

## How to (re-)politicize waste?

### *First step: The wasted as the 'other' of Capital*

If the project of (re)politicizing the economy is to consider the rules for the material implementation of capitalist growth and its wasteful consequences, we believe a materialist approach, such as the Marxist, should be taken into account. For Harvey (2014), this requires considering the class structure of capitalism and the process of surplus value exploitation that the latter enables, as theorized by Marx. From this perspective, capitalism is seen as a regime of production in which surplus value is harvested by the capitalist class from human labour, transposed into an exchangeable commodity-form and then sold back to livelihood-seeking labourers. The assumption behind it is that all subjects put to work in this way will not be able to avoid recognizing themselves as a materially 'worn out' class, rendered 'exchangeable' and ultimately disposable, and to identify as 'the other of Capital', as Marxist scholars Gidwani and Reddy have put it (2011).

Harvey's (2014) reading of Marx remains distrustful of post-structuralist elaborations of Marx, even in their commendable attempt to occupy what Sum and Jessop (2013) have regarded as a middle ground between the two extremes of economic determinism and semioticist discourse analysis. Instead, Harvey insists that capitalism is a ship where the fortunes of the 'different classes, genders, ethnicities and races' on the decks and their 'sometimes friendly and at other times violently oppositional' interactions ultimately depend on the permanent pounding of the material engine of capital located in this ship's bowels (Harvey, 2014: 9). Such exploitative engine, he warns, is mobilized by the permanent effort to deal with irresolvable contradictions, the most dangerous of which is that of endless compound growth: a take-all-replenish-nothing dynamic commanded by the obscenely wealthy, which requires the all-encompassing commodification/valuation of nature and the creativity of executives and consultants in devising every charm imaginable to justify it (Harvey, 2014). This also implies the geographical re-shaping of the world in order to grant capital

access to cheap labour coming from marginalized territories (Mcintyre and Nast, 2011).

How then to conceive an effort of (re)politicizing the naturalized ‘sustainable growth’ discourse without compromising a confrontation of the systematic material exploitation of humans and nature for value production and accumulation that is immanent to capitalism, without falling into the de-politicizing reductionism of explaining the material through economicist, scientificist arguments? In terms of the critique of the ZWCE we are particularly interested in: How to conceive waste (or lack thereof), in a single gesture, as both a contestable symbolic representation and an economic contradiction mobilizing material production?

We think an answer to these questions can be found by discussing, from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, what Harvey (2014: 4) considers the contradiction rooting all contradictions in wasteful growth-driven capitalism: the contradiction between reality and appearance, or what Marx called ‘commodity fetishism’. This begins by closely examining the basic fact that the appearance of commodities means more for the labourer/consumer subject than the reality of their use as enabled by a specific material process of production in which nature and labour power are ‘combusted’ to enable surplus value circulation and accumulation. There is an irresolvable contradiction, which Marx termed ‘fetishist’: a kind of delusional desire for the masks and disguises of the exchangeable fruits of labour (i.e. prices, brands, among others) that the labourer cannot help to enact despite the unequivocal fact that his/her humanity was wasted during the process of optimizing their production (Harvey, 2014; Yates, 2011).

For Marxists like Harvey (2014; see also Yates, 2011) such paradoxical fetishism, along with the human and objective wastes it endorses, should be resolved politically through what he calls a ‘revolutionary humanism’. In his view, subjects could be led to consciously re-evaluate the inherent wasting of capitalist mechanisms and then prompted to re-shape them towards a less abusive class structure, that is to say, a structure where labour does not equate to waste as the other of Capital (i.e. the labourer as an utterly wasted being). However, such trust in humanist emancipation seems to altogether disregard the problem we are posing in this paper: that of de-politicization in the construction of a ‘naturalized’ political economy, and along with it, the active disablement of political subjectivity as an outcome of fetishist desire for ‘green’ commodities exchanged within such naturalized order. This is the specific problem that Lacanian theory is capable to elaborate on.

Perhaps it is Žižek's work (1994) that has been most impactful in its assimilation of the Marxist critique of political economy to the Lacanian analysis of subjectivity. In Žižek's (1994) reading of Lacan, the capitalist political economy behind fetishist consumerism, as depicted by Marx, is conceived to be structured in a way that is homologous to the unconscious, symbolic construction of subjectivity in human experience.

Following Lacan's appropriation of Freudian theory, Žižek (1994) contends that both the commodity-fetish and the unconscious, as expressed by the symptom and the dream, can only work at a psycho-social level by establishing a meaningful relation with the appearance of identity (of both the subject and the commodity that entices him/her) where such an identity is always 'contradicted' in Marxist terms, yet still always 'fuelled' by the reality of the subject's embodied experience of desire (Žižek, 1994: 300). The strangeness of the commodity-fetish and the symptom-dream formation appears to respond to a hidden constructed meaning or 'framing', says Žižek (1994), but the deciphering of this meaning is not enough to explain the emergence of the strange element, as the emergence of the latter is caused by the primordial link between a material force (i.e. labour or unconscious desire) and a pure symbolic form that offers itself as a 'meaning to be deciphered' (i.e. commodity or the dream).

From this psychoanalytically-informed perspective, any 'revolutionary humanism' is denounced as naïve and hopeless elaboration on Marx's work. This is because the focus of Marxist thought is seen not as placed on endorsing a social science that can track the meaning of commodities and the economic regimes that sustain them, but rather on how the very effort of interpreting the meaning of commodities, serves to fuel the capitalist order at a material level, in the same way an interpretation of a dream serves not to exhaust the dreaming but to encourage it. For Žižek (1994), the only way to read the Marxist 'contradiction' at the heart of capitalism is to acknowledge the fundamental contradictory fact of the Freudian unconscious that Lacan revitalized, namely, that the desire to know requires a desire not to know, just like the desire to re-interpret the place for waste (i.e. recycling) requires the desire to waste.

Žižek's lead (1994) shows how Lacan's take on subjectivation is attuned to the labour theory of value (see also Tomšič, 2015). Speaking as a politico-economic psychoanalyst, Lacan (2007) regards the subject's identity in terms of a commodity birthed to register a 'surplus' of experience and repress at the same time the traces of its mode of material production, which takes place within an exploitative regime (Lacan, 2007: 206-207). Subjectivation in this sense is conceived as a symbolic/discursive grammar that serves to deliver a sublime

'extra' of social harmony – de-politicized and ignorant of exploitation – precisely when the subject becomes too sensitive to the 'contradiction' (in a Marxist sense) that his/her embodied and ever-expanding desire for consumption establishes in relation to a positive sense of self-certainty. In other words, the subject emerges by attaching himself/herself to what Žižek deems a fantasy: a discourse that disavows the wastefulness in the subject's repeated effort of searching for the signifiers of commercial value (i.e. brands) that orientate the sustaining of his/her own existence via consumption (Böhm and Batta, 2010: 357).

*Second step: Waste (management) as the capitalist 'Other' of subjectivity*

We think the real breakthrough that Lacanian theory allows is based in its reformulation of the Marxist conception of a 'wasted class', where waste is situated 'as the political other of capitalist value' (Gidwani and Reddy, 2011: 1625). To appreciate this, one must consider how Lacan's theory of subjectivity develops a more complex understanding of the political as a discursive-symbolic problem. Succinctly put, Lacan differs from post-structuralists in that he considers subjective identity not only a mis-recognized 'empty frame' that can (and must) be re-constructed, but also and simultaneously as a 'passionate attachment' at the material-affective level, which provides an enjoyable sense of autonomy and satisfaction and thus resists direct re-construction. This imperviousness of identity to re-construction or re-framing is signalled by what Lacan conceptualized as the fundamental function of the 'Other' in the discursive constitution of subjectivity.

The Lacanian concept of the Other represents a particular discursive function or grammar that allows the subject to defend from or repress unconscious desire, stemming out of material, passionate attachments, and acquire a sense of identity (Stavrakakis, 2008; Cremin, 2012). Originally veiling the mother's threatening desire for a world other than the baby, the Other represents a kind of implicit alternate voice that is incorporated within the subject's enunciation, and which provides a sense legitimacy, unity and harmony to any narrative or object the subject identifies with. In this sense, it represents what was seen in the previous section as the capacity to both 'frame' and 're-frame' what is deemed 'empty' at the level of discursivity; the Other's gaze serves to verify the totality of discursivity, including not only its constructed meanings but also the remaining blocks with which meaning can be re-built. However, at the same time, the all-too-encompassing character of the Other can only reveal to be incomplete, forcing the subject into the trauma of experiencing the ontological lack of discourse. This is a constitutive failure that subjectivity itself requires in order to emerge anew and afford the adaptive reconstruction of identity in relation to its underlying passionate attachments. It is the subject's desire behind the sense of

uniqueness in identity that needs the Other to fail, so that such desire remains alive and active. If the Other proves to be indeed total, then desire becomes saturated and exhausted (Stavrakakis, 2008: 1044).

The Other, in this sense, can be pinpointed as the specific discursive function that serves to guarantee subjectivity itself, as a hastily and haphazardly achieved yet strong sense of self-certainty. It can be interpreted in the subject's articulation as a highly naturalized point of reference, of universal reach, that compels the subject to enjoy his/her actions, thoughts and general experience of the world. However, the Other can only enable the subject to achieve this in a way that is always paradoxical or 'contradictory' (in a Marxist sense), because in the end it reveals to be empty. The Other works to leave the subject precariously desiring something else, keeping him/her alive and drawn to the social as a result. Yet, this in turn works to establish a continued loop in everyday experience, one that reaffirms the existential safety of renewed commodity consumption (Cremin, 2012). We could say that the Other prompts the subject to regenerate – or even 're-cycle' – him/herself through an endless stream of commodity consumption, a cycle in which the subject masters his/her self, while always also losing the grip – or even wasting – such a self (Daly, 2006).

Based on this understanding, Lacan's contribution to our inquiry on waste can be accurately specified: more than the other of capitalist valuation (Gidwani and Reddy, 2011), waste, along with the effort to manage it, can be seen as occupying the place of the Other of exploited subjectivity. This is because the lacking Other, from which the subject desires an answer but never gets one, is in our age the programme of global capitalism that hegemonizes all social links. Its inconsistency is related to economic growth; the more it develops, the more it wastes and spoils. This renders the subject's questioning about his/her own constitution and the meaning of his/her self conceptually homologous to the questioning about the meaning of waste/wasting.

Facing the capitalist, managerial Other, the question 'who am I, what (commodity) do I want?' becomes 'is waste really waste?' and 'is the commodity worthy?', in other words, 'has the commodity been really rendered useless?' We can see this assimilation in the dilemma of the sustainability-wary subject who beholds the opinion of environmental experts: 'is global warming really real?'; and also, 'could we not just offset (i.e. re-cycle) global warming?' (see Böhm and Dabhi, 2009). We wonder if there is not also a questioning about the subject's own survival amidst capitalist growth: 'will I be alive if the earth is in crisis, if the economy keeps growing?' (see Swyngedouw, 2009).

From the perspective signalled by these questions, we think it is fair to affirm that today waste is the beating heart of both subjectivity and the dominant socio-economic order. On the one hand, millions of people have been wasted socially (i.e. segregated, impoverished, abused) and forcefully displaced to environments where rubbish accumulates and livelihoods are threatened if not totally contaminated (Böhm, et al., 2014). On the other hand, waste management is being more and more perceived in this age as the heroic cause of the citizen-subject, while the emergence of waste is seen immediately as an opportunity to take active responsibility for the repairing and restoration of the world to its natural order.

How could such blatant contradiction consolidate over time? We realize this occurs because the heart of subjectivity, recurrently failed (or ‘wasted’) in its claims for a stable identity of self, works, in turn, to jumpstart the heart of the always-inconsistent Other of capitalism, the heart-engine of the Other of wasteful growth, mythologized of late as ‘circular’, that is to say, wasteless and sustainable (Sköld, 2010: 374). Accordingly, we stand by Lacan’s famous proposition, about the structures of subjectivity and capitalism being homologous in the current version of the post-industrial political economy (Lacan, 2007: 20; see also Tomšič, 2015; Vanheule, 2016). The structure of capitalism is set to grow through constant wasting, but at the same time it is set to prompt the subject to be fascinated by the repeated ‘wasting’ of his/her self, by constantly offering him/her a commodity for him/her to fetishize; the ‘green-and-lean’ commodity, which mirrors the subject’s aspiration to embody a sustainable being.

### *Third step: How to politicize the wasted.*

Going back to the problem of de-politicization, we think the crucial issue is that the subject becomes ‘harmoniously trapped’ in the endless ‘re-cycling’ of his/her own ‘contradiction’ (in a Marxist sense). The subject has to cover his/her constitutive division – we could say his/her own ‘wasting’ – with the a-political fantasy of the manageable-waste-commodity fetish. What is required then is to decode more accurately how the grammar of this relentless re-cycling of self is structured and stabilized, and how the subject can construct his/her self differently, now in politicized terms, through a different grammar.

From the perspective of the subject-consumer who is concerned with waste and its management, and delving deeper (albeit briefly) in the Lacanian framework presented above (e.g. Cederström and Spicer, 2014; Jones, 2010; Stavrakakis, 2008; Žižek, 1994), such decoding can be accomplished by briefly considering the specific registers of subjective experience that Lacan conceptualized.

On the one hand, we consider what Lacan calls the imaginary register (Roberts, 2005), akin to the purely discursivist approach discussed in a previous section: a narrative dimension of experience that thrives on sense-making and social recognition. At this level waste appears to get re-cycled and is narrated as part of a manageable process reaching 'zero' levels; this is the register where the subject constructs his/her identity as a sustainability-wary consumer and active recycler.

On the other hand, we consider what Lacan calls the symbolic register (Stavrakakis, 2008), where the discursive function of the Other can be pinpointed, and thus, where the failure of discourse (and discursivism) can be located. At this level the subject faces the fact that the imaginary suppositions of recycling (and himself as recycler) can only be fulfilled by testing its logic again and again, that is to say, by repeatedly consuming and wasting, say, in the bin that has been assigned with a righteous signifier like the recycling logo displaying the arrows of 'circularity' (Jones, 2010). It is such legitimization of waste as 'circular' or always-already manageable that we have termed the Other of eco-business capital; such is the order that must be disrupted so that the subject is politically enabled.

The consideration of these registers leads us to a single realization: what must be re-discovered, or better yet, re-invented, is the construal of the reality of waste. This implies re-appreciating waste outside or beyond the Other of capitalist circularity, assuming it not as always-already manageable or recyclable – an object of humanistic ethics for the sake of the sustainability-wary subject and eco-business shareholders – but as crude material spoilage at human and environmental levels (Yates, 2011). Waste must be seen as wasted labour, the other of Capital that we can no longer see because of our fetishist fascinations, guaranteed as they are by the capitalist Other. This is about waste as equal to the rotten and valueless of the world: those who embody the traumatic failure of megalopolitan capitalism, with whom we can establish solidarity (Daly, 2006: 192).

To conclude, in light of these claims about the re-positioning of political subjectivity *vis-à-vis* waste and its circular management, the above reference to materiality and embodiment must be briefly elaborated. Materiality is a dimension that will play a central role in our analysis of the Apple case, in the following section, and it can be considered as the third Lacanian register of subjective experience, without which the other two – the imaginary and the symbolic – cannot be used to the full for analytic purposes. The reference to the material is meant to signal to the affective register, where the passionate attachment to the narrative of ZWCE, set to orientate practices of consumption,

is concretely forged, and where the fetishist link with the sustainable commodity takes hold of the body (Böhm and Batta, 2010).

This third affective, material register can be understood by examining the formal term Lacan assigned to it: the register of the ‘Real’. What this term technically stands for is not ‘objective reality’ as an unequivocal reference, but the exact opposite: it represents that which escapes and resists the narrative sense-making of what appears and feels to the subject to be ‘reality’ – what Lacan calls the imaginary – insofar as this narrated ‘reality’ is assumed by the subject as always-already guaranteed by the function of the Other that the narrator invokes – what Lacan calls the symbolic (Cederström and Spicer, 2014).

The Real stands for the very failure of the imaginary-symbolic production of narrated ‘realities’, including the ‘reality’ of the commodity, a failure that is an essential condition for narration and sense to exist. Narration and sense-making always emerge in response or in defence of the gaps in previous narratives, because the Other never fully works and ‘contradiction’ prevails; their function always depends on this renewal. In this sense, the Real should not be seen as detached from imaginary-symbolic productions. Rather, it should be seen as actually embedded into them, as a radical ‘outside’ that is paradoxically ‘inside’ them.

It is this embedding of failure within the subject’s fascination with imaginary-symbolic self-constructions that should be considered, with precision, as an affective embodiment, because it stands for the material force that drives the subject to desire these constructed objects, and at the same time, to desire them to fail, so that s/he can construct new, better ones. This is why the Lacanian term ‘Real’, with all its ambiguity, serves to define what this register is all about. It stands for something that feels more Real than ‘reality’ itself: it is defined as the force behind that subjective feeling, which is constitutive part of the (discursive) construction of such perceivable ‘reality’. In short, it is the material affectivity that fuels, yet at the same time, exceeds the subject’s connection and fascination with meaningful narratives on the self and the socio-economic world. The mysterious fantasy that leads the subject to fetishize the ‘reality’ of the commodity, in this case the ‘reality’ of waste that can be managed circularly (i.e. ‘zero-waste’), can only be explained by this material, affective bond: the manageable-waste-commodity feels to the sustainability-wary subject as more Real than its actual ‘reality’.

In the following section, we will analyze aspects in the case of waste management programmes at Apple Inc. from the perspective of our Marxist-Lacanian framework, including and particularly focusing on the three registers

discussed above. In our view the latter are key to understanding how the a-political narrative of waste management is woven into the subject's embodied experience. We believe such comprehension will, in turn, reveal something about how the subject can be 'unplugged' from his/her capture within the arrangement of sustainable growth capitalism, and how s/he can open his/herself to political intervention as a consequence.

### The repeated enjoyment of iWaste: Apple's 'circular' programme

To start comprehending the affective charge involved in the constitution of the subject, and thus in the possibility for politicizing, we propose to follow some of the instances of 'contradiction', inconsistency or failure at the level of discourse, in the moment when a commodified relationship is established between a ZWCE-certified company like Apple Inc. and the sustainability-wary subject.

To accomplish this, we begin by acknowledging, on the one hand, a provider of polluting products that nonetheless embodies ethical values, and, on the other hand, a consumer of a polluting product but endowed with a social conscience (Cremin, 2012: 55). The features of the former can be immediately appreciated in the beautifully designed texts in the 'environmental responsibility' section of Apple's UK webpage:

We work hard to keep electronic devices out of landfill so that the precious resources they contain can be reused. And we want to ensure that these devices are recycled properly so they don't pose a threat to human health or the environment. That's why we've developed recycling collection events, take-back initiatives and efforts like Apple Renew, a global programme that lets you bring used Apple devices to any Apple Store for reuse or responsible recycling. We're also working with over 160 recyclers around the world, whose facilities we hold to rigorous standards of environmental compliance, health and safety, and social responsibility. (Apple Inc., 2016)

Such description of Apple's commitment to recycling, particularly the responsible use of materials, is then re-affirmed by displaying hard-data: 'Through our efforts, we've kept more than 270 million kilos of equipment out of landfill since 1994' (Apple Inc., 2016). The company clearly conveys its 'zero-waste' conviction; it claims to have reached a robot-like point of optimization:

So we invented Liam, a line of robots that can quickly disassemble iPhone 6, sorting its high-quality components and reducing the need to mine more resources from the earth. With two Liam lines running, we can take apart up to 2.4 million phones a year. (Apple Inc., 2016)

The commitment to zero-waste goes further. The company is also ‘committed to making sure all the waste created by our supply chain and by us is reused, recycled, composted or, when necessary, converted into energy. It’s an ambitious goal that requires collaboration among multiple Apple teams, local governments and speciality recyclers, but we’ve already seen great success’ (Apple Inc., 2016). Although little hard is actually provided, this talk of ambitions and goals is nevertheless effective in portraying Apple’s commitment to the ethos of the ZWCE. Even a logo and a brand has been invented for the new ‘circular’ Apple Inc.: “Renew”, a greened apple made out of the arrow of perpetual circularity.



Figure 1: Apple Inc.’s renew logo (retrieved from [apple.com](http://apple.com)).

At this point we can turn to the experience of the consumer. Let us imagine, from a Lacanian stance, the situation previous to the encounter between sustainable commodity provider (in this case, Apple) and the sustainability-wary subject. A formal guarantee – an authorizing discourse, the Lacanian symbolic or chain of signifiers – is for a moment at stake, a test on how trustworthy the Other is in assuring that the ‘appearance’ of a commodity – its branding, the Lacanian imaginary – is ‘in reality’ recyclable or even ‘zero-wasteful’.

For a second, this is truly an uneasy moment on both sides, as failure is lingering. For how can the subject know if Apple’s engineering inside the iPhone

is really of ‘zero-waste’ quality? Can the subject know all the certification data that proves it? What about the voices that have warned about the ineffectiveness of Apple’s e-waste management policies (e.g. How green is your Apple?, 2006). This is a moment in which the suppression of unsustainability by the largest and most sophisticated personal electronics provider cannot yet be assured; a moment of anxiety, of overwhelming (albeit fleeting) intensity.

This burst of affectivity is just a flash that does not get to achieve full ontological consistency – it is the Real that escapes – and yet the subject subsequently shapes this intensity of embodied experience into a reality, as s/he cannot help but to ‘leap forward’ in elation and embrace the meanings in the positive socio-environmental imagery offered by Apple’s marketing. Apple products and communications show not only the new Apple Renew brand but also green stickers, leaf pictures and earth globes, graphics representing trees and generally the ecosystem. They also proudly bear the recycling arrows as a medal of honour for services rendered for the sake of the environment. They appear to be connected and ‘circulate’ in unity with the natural, like the evocative apple in their logo, which one can be said, metaphorically, to have ‘bitten into’ and enjoyed many times in one’s life.

Moreover and crucially, the design and features of Apple products display an effort of ‘zero-waste’ optimization. Their built-in notebook batteries, for instance, ‘last up to five years. Which saves on buying new batteries, produces less waste, and increases the lifespan of your notebook’ (Apple Inc., 2016). The ‘unibody’ mode of construction of their iPads and MacBooks, they add, makes them thinner and more resilient, requiring around 70 percent less material than the previous design (Apple Inc., 2016). This accompanies all sort of publicly communicated claims about their carbon accountability to prevent climate change and productive optimization for energetic efficiency. Everything is engineered to perfection, mimicking nature’s wasteless cycles and systems.



Figure 2: MacBook Air Slim, 2013 (retrieved from [macworld.co.uk](http://macworld.co.uk)).

Such ‘green and lean’ imaginary, as it is obvious, becomes irresistible for a subject who is avid for finding proof, let us say, of his/her own ‘unibody’, of her/his own worthy place amidst the world of commodities and recycling bins. But why exactly? Because of the specific emotional vectoring that the signifiers attached to manageable-waste provide to the subject’s embodied anxiety when facing the Other. This is what happens for example when the subject holds the iPhone in his/her hands and is able to see with his/her own eyes (and screen-touching fingers) that the product is much more efficient (i.e. less wasteful) than any other, or when s/he sees a high-resolution documentary of factory optimization in Apple’s webpage, where ‘applied nature’ is discussed. Paraphrasing one of Lacan’s central adages: it is precisely the blind trust, without proof, in the ‘caring and responsible’ gaze of the Apple-recycling-Other, that allows the subject to acquire and enjoy retroactively his/her own eyes (and fingertips) (Lacan, 1998: 74; Wozniak, 2010: 405).

This brief insight into the case of Apple allows us to finally appreciate the role that the Lacanian understanding of materiality, affectivity and the Real play in subjectivity, and thus, in politicization. Speaking neither as a post-structuralist (i.e. semiotic form only) nor as a Marxist economist (i.e. material, exploitative force only), Lacan contributes a kind of Thanatological interpretation, as it focuses precisely on what fails to live and falls off dead from the subject’s embodied self-construction, namely, enjoyment (Cederström and Spicer, 2014: 15; Lacan, 1998). What the brief analysis of the Apple case reveals is how the fundamental subjective economy at the heart of organized socio-economic exchanges depends on the impossibility of exhausting enjoyment, and the consequential need to reproduce it perpetually, in order to animate the

materiality of life. The cool, 'green-and-lean' Apple brand imagery, along with the slick, glistening, white features of the iCommodity as a fully optimized material object, work together as a machine to compel the consumer-subject to acquire himself/herself un-satisfactorily, all too hastily and solipsistically, and yet to do so in a most enjoyable manner.

Apple's brand of circularity is a contradiction-engine in Marxist-Lacanian sense. It drives the subject to consume his/her own green-and-lean subtracted or 'wasted' enjoyment. The enjoyment that s/he rushes to extract from the discourse on circularity – the appearance of the commodity – does not (and cannot) match the enjoyment actually obtained – the reality of the unpackaged commodity, programmed to quickly decay into obsolescence – and yet this can only be endured by reinforcing the trust in the guarantees of circularity in the Apple brand and by constantly repeating the entire effort. Accordingly, elaborating on Cremin's thoughts (2012: 56), we appreciate how Apple's 'zero-waste' programme works in the same paradoxical way as the latest 'Zero' version of what is perhaps the world's most famous commodity: Coke. The more you consume it, the less you feel satisfied with it, as the brand itself is the promise of something lacking. Regardless if what is lacking is sugar or waste, the final result of consuming 'embodied lacks' is a mortifying yet strangely enjoyable fetishist addiction to the commodity.

## Concluding discussion

Why is the move towards a Marxist-Lacanian critique of growth capitalism and the circular political economy so important? It is so because, as the Apple Inc. case illustrates, the image of a wasteless post-growth economy is never far away from the affective enjoyment that capital's 'green' rhetoric seeks to command in the experience of the sustainability-wary consumer.

In this paper, we have proposed that the idea of manageable waste represents the Other of capitalism, the true symbolic network behind the imaginary of sustainable growth, and that the subject's material (i.e. libidinal) economy of constant self-renewal through consumption, modelled following the template of the Other, is set to match capital's material economy of constant self-renewal through labour-and-environment-wasting production.

While forms of post-Marxism, such as Laclau and Mouffe's project, endorse the de-economization of the political, we acknowledge the need to re-economize the political again, as Daly (2006) suggests. Despite their contribution to foregrounding the need for politicization, discursivist analysts like Lakoff and

Laclau are wrong in reducing the conditions of surplus value accumulation to discourse as a semiotic praxis of identity and meaning construction (and in general, to the project of constructing democracy). Following Lacan (2007), we understand discourse as always-already objectified and legitimized in a concrete, pre-existing socio-material economy, aiming at sustained consumption, perpetual growth and constant wasting. Discursivity always has to economize its own order to work as hegemony, as its aspirations to universality and naturalized truths are inevitably anchored in particular engagements between desired subjects of discourse, in search of self-certainty, and material elements that can mirror their identity. A Marxist-Lacanian reading situates waste as precisely that symbolic-material particularity, and thus, as an integral part of discourse, and ultimately, of (re)politicization.

Then, what are the possibilities for countering the de-politicization of waste in contemporary consumer capitalism?

Concisely put, in this paper we have argued that the potential for politicization can only begin to be realized after the core assumption behind the a-political ‘positive politics’ that the ‘zero-waste-circular-economy’ (ZWCE) programme is offering can be presented to the sustainability-wary consumer on an inverted form, so that its contingent assemblage is revealed and its naturalized status is debunked.

If the core assumption behind the ZWCE programme is that the full suppression of waste at the level of production is possible if the consumer-level practice of recycling is re-signified as a crucial operational challenge, we propose that the inverse assumption is embraced: namely, that the increase in waste management capacity, and the mastering of recycling at all levels, can only lead to the multiplication of waste.

While the ZWCE advocates to liberate our desire to consume from the stains of un-sustainability, offering us proof of eco-business’ capacity to end waste, we invite our reader to appreciate that recycling has become a fetish, and that there is no longer a desire to consume without a desire to recycle. We believe that the thrust for de-politicizing the social relations of growth-capitalism feeds precisely from the repression of the fetishism of waste, in the name of a supposedly wasteless world, full of ‘green-and-lean’ commodities.

Part of this re-appreciation of waste requires acknowledging a strange and perhaps even tragic fact: that the ZWCE institution is able to absorb the original edge of unsustainability critique by acting as if a semiotician discourse analyst had already been incorporated to it. It is the very ZWCE discourse that is

proposing to 'disown the fetish' of recycling practices that are deemed too narrow in their ambition and misconstrued in their supposed capacity to offset unsustainability. The ZWCE programme brings forth a critique of the 'empty frame' of recycling, as it sets out to contest (i.e. de-naturalize), re-construct and re-hegemonize its meaning. In this sense, the strategies of both eco-business and semioticist post-Marxist discourse analysis demonstrate a disturbing alignment *vis-à-vis* waste. They both endorse the possibility of radically re-signifying capitalism's universal symbolic guidelines, beyond the material logic of any particular (recycling) economy.

Going against this immensely powerful current, the reversal of core ZWCE assumptions opens possibilities for an engagement with the material, affective (i.e. libidinal) economy by allowing us to appreciate how late capitalism's main recourse is that of appropriating critique and then selling it back to the ethically-driven, sustainability-wary subject (Cremin, 2012). Capitalism de-politicizes, and it does so precisely when we think we are re-constructing its semiotic boundaries. The more we believe in giving alternative meanings to recycling, the more we consume, and the less we waste on a material level, and the closer we get to the ideal of a fully circular economy, the more we are allowed to consume without taking an ethico-political stance.

As Lacan (2007) points out capital is becoming more and more capable of doing all the thinking for us, because capitalism has come to work beyond the level of meaning (Lacan, 2007). Rather, it takes advantage of our increasingly diminished connection with meanings, to operate at the material, affective level of enjoyment, the level where passionate, fetishist attachments are forged. Through the marketing of the already-recycled, circular, 'green-and-lean' yet wastefully produced commodity, it relentlessly commands the subject to 'repair!' and to 'recycle!' as the way to provide a sense of wholesomeness to his/her worldly, social existence. As Baudrillard (1998) has noted:

Waste, far from being an irrational residue, takes on a positive function, taking over where rational utility leaves off to play its part in a higher social functionality – a social logic in which waste appears ultimately as the essential function, the extra degree of expenditure, superfluity, the ritual uselessness of 'expenditure for nothing' becoming the site of production of values, differences and meanings on both the individual and the social level ... does not affluence only have meaning in wastage? (Baudrillard, 1998: 44)

Our conclusion on politicization, then, is simple: for politics to re-emerge, the endless repetition of waste/wasting must be interrupted. Yet, crucially, we do not propose waste should be interrupted directly in 'reality', as that would immediately put us in the position of believing blindly in a 'zero-waste' world where waste is fully managed. Instead, we propose waste should be interrupted

at the level of sustainability-wary subjectivity. We believe the repetition of waste is homologous to the frantic repetition of the wasting (and renewal) of a sense of self, and so that the interruption that matters is the interruption of enjoyment, the enjoyment of a sustainable image of self that is projected into the purchasable mirror of ‘green-and-lean’ commodities.

Essentially, such move towards politicization calls for a desire to leave, so to speak, the subjective wounds open and the waste alone to rot, un-optimized. Considering the Lacanian framework presented above, this requires the subject to refrain from reducing semiotic form to material-affective force or vice versa. Instead, it requires considering the two simultaneously, as intertwined strands of the same fetishist attachment, as it is precisely this intertwining that should be interrupted. Taking cues from Cederström and Spicer (2014), and taking the example of electronic waste or what has been called ‘iWaste’ in the case of Apple (Slade, 2007), let us finish our argument by briefly illustrating the two angles from which to understand this mode of political intervention.

On the one hand, politicizing Apple’s circular strategy calls for revealing the material, affective force behind the semiotic form. This implies confronting Apple’s wasteless-ness imaginary with its policies and practices for operationalizing ‘planned obsolescence’: a programme for the designing and future production of artefacts that seeks to ensure they become rapidly outdated so that the consumer can replace them with newer versions that are already in early stages of production. Apple calls this ‘innovation’, but, in fact, it is about the company prompting consumers to continuously replace gadgets that have become outdated for a range of reasons. Apple may or may not purposefully make their products run slower after a certain period. This is not for us to say. Rather, the point we are making is that the concrete material enactment of Apple’s ‘planned obsolescence’ is intimately related to its ‘circular’ rhetoric, which propels the consumer-subject into action by signifying iWaste as always-already managed: ‘I need to buy the latest iPhone or MacBook because it is more efficient and optimal; it has been designed better; it is lean and wasteless’.

On the other hand, politicization calls for revealing the semiotic form behind the material, affective force. This implies considering the fact that consumerism and wasting in late capitalism is quite cynical. The production of enjoyment, the affective force, is sustained by consumer-subjects knowingly; they know very well about the material implications and passionate attachments (Žižek, 2013). Yet, this cynicism is not explained by the fact that there is much that the subject does not know, and thus, it cannot be disrupted by providing new, more encompassing and critical meanings about unsustainability. The cynicism is

rather sustained because the subject enjoyment depends him/her knowing very little.

Apple's record-breaking gadget sales will produce millions of tons of iWaste, a process that become a major concern for the consumer electronics industry, not to mention the communities directly affected by it (Grant and Oteng-Ababio, 2012). This wastefulness is evident, even in the small instance of opening an Apple package, which can only reveal multiple layers of plastic that earth will take centuries to degrade. Yet, enjoyment prevails in the experience of the sustainability-wary subject who reads the 'green-and-lean' ZCWE certification stamped in the form of a logo on the plastic that encases the Apple commodity, not because s/he knows 'some but not all' the story, but because the little s/he knows is more than enough. In fact, his/her way of knowing about his/her own ethico-political commitment to sustainability is reduced to the consumption of the Apple brand. As Lacan (2007) proposed, enjoyment is obtained in terms of 'bits' or 'slivers' of discourse in relation to an Other that works in muteness beyond the level of meaning.

Overall, Apple can be seen as occupying the place of what Jones (2010) has called the inter-passive Other: the company shows to feel guilty and to do the recycling for us (i.e. through Liam robots) so that we can be guaranteed a guilt-free and sustained shopping practice (Jones, 2010). This 'guilt fetishism', as Cremin (2012) calls it, where the subject is prompted to purchase the guilty, regretful brand, enables Apple to manage the cultural meaning and ethical prestige of its commodities, while keeping the logic of growth via surplus-value accumulation intact (Brei and Böhm, 2013). Interrupting it requires disclosing that the affect behind the symbolic guidelines of consumption, the material force, is not naïve or natural at all, and that affectivity itself has been economized, shaped into a symbolic form, by the growth-logic of capital.

At last, we come to grasp that the seminal, radical interruption, then, must begin with an intervention over our speaking bodies, which can afford to mediate the link between (wo)man and his/her production, between subjectivity and waste. It is not a grandiose but a humble intervention, perhaps best accomplished through the careful re-crafting of rough materials, such as love, intimacy and guilt. We desperately need a break for the sake of wondering. What if the form of Apple or any other 'green-and-lean' brand is dislodged as the obvious shaper of the force of the social? What if our fears and hopes come to be felt, recognized and shared – in one word, enjoyed – through the use of vessels that have not been programmed to obsolesce into waste?

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