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Jean-Marie Rousseau*, September 17, 2018

Too much trash and overflowing dustbins!

On June 5th, 2018, Benoît Lecomte, a French architect established in the United States for more than 25 years, embarked on a slightly crazy challenge by plunging into the Pacific Ocean with the intention of swimming from Choshi in Japan across to San Francisco. His ambition is to cover nearly 9,000 km over a six- to eight-month period, all with a view to calling international public attention to the pollution of the oceans. He will cross the Northern section of the so-called “plastic continent” – an area three times the size of France – a build-up of waste particles, disintegrated by the sun and seawater. In August the project was suspended due to two severe typhoons, but the Frenchman was swimming again by August 19. It is also worth pointing out that a study (‘The Great Pacific Garbage Patch Isn’t What You Think It Is’, Lebreton et al.) published by National Geographic and Nature (4666) showed in March 2018 that nets abandoned or lost by fishermen account for 46% of plastic waste entering the sea...

Over the same period – mid-July – in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in the heart of the Caribbean, an environmental catastrophe was unfolding and making the front pages of the media, tarnishing its dream image by turning it into a huge waste field – of bottles, packaging and rubbish... – which are being discharged onto sandbanks and surface waters. This pollution poses a major danger for the environment and human life: “it causes illness to animal species, significantly undermines the biodiversity, and threatens the health of all species including humankind”, says a volunteer.

These two international events place us, from one region of the globe to another, at the very heart of the concerns associated with waste treatments and the circular economy.

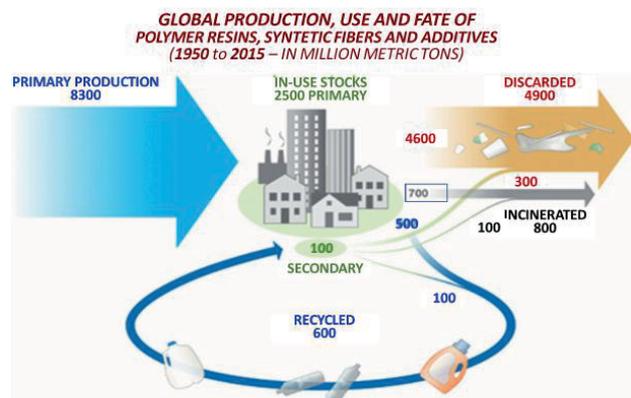
But 2018 has also been marked by a geo-political breakthrough with a major impact all around the world, ever since China announced to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on July 18, 2017 that it was willing to stop acting as the “dustbin of the world”. With the country importing about a million tons of waste (50 million by 2015) every year – mainly from Europe and the United States – its

decision is likely to disrupt the entire world trade in waste material. Hence, 24 categories of waste originating from Europe – including certain types of plastics (and notably, the infamous plastic PET bottles), unsorted paper, wool and cotton – have now been banned since the beginning of this year. For more than twenty years rich countries have been in the habit of discharging their plastic waste in this way and today they face the stark realisation that they now have to incinerate it or bury the material in public or private landfills...



CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Source: VI World Material Summit 20-21 November 2017
G. Kiriakidis – Heraklion / RWTH AACHEN



Source : 2017 Study by Geyer, Jambeck, Law, 19 July 2017
Production use and fate of all plastics ever made - Science Advances

Consequently, for some months now, many waste recycling plants in the U.S and Europe no longer know how to eliminate the excess of paper and plastics and the “recyclers” of the western countries are determined to dump them on public landfill sites or simply cancel any collection and recycling. The other importing countries, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, or India, have proven incapable of absorbing or accommodating these tens of millions of tons.

Arnaud Brunet, Director of the Bureau of International Recycling (BIR - Brussels) believes this to be a problem of “seismic” proportions at a time when the European Union exports nearly half of its collected and sorted plastic materials, 85% of this to China. Every year the United States also export more than half of their supply of non-ferrous metal scrap, as well as paper and plastics (amounting to 16.2 million tons in 2016). The spokesperson for the NWRA (National Waste & Recycling Association) says that “manufacturing facilities are looking at how to store their waste and some factories are storing it on parking lots or on external sites”. The European Union recently announced – on January 16, 2018 – its strategy to reduce its single-use plastic materials, with the aim that all packaging will be recyclable by 2030. Meanwhile, only 30% of plastic waste is recycled, with the rest being incinerated to produce energy (39%), or sent to landfill (31%). Frans Timmermans, vice-president of the European Commission, and Commissioner for Better Regulation, Interinstitutional Relations, the Rule of Law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, therefore concludes that “We should use this decision to question ourselves and ask ourselves why we Europeans are not able to recycle our own waste”. Every year European countries consume about 16 million tons, only 30% of which are recovered for recycling: “If we don’t change the way we produce and use plastics, there will be more plastics than fish in our oceans by 2050.”



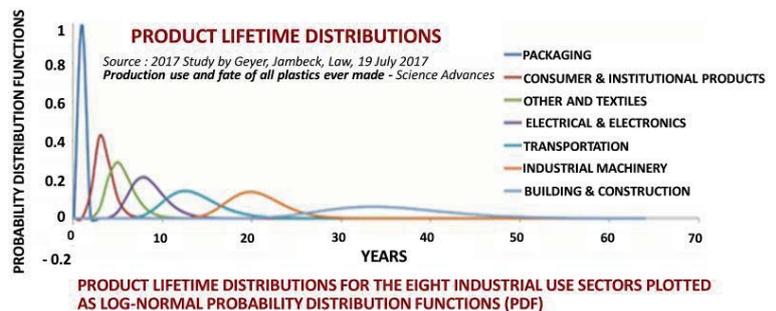
By June 2018, the Council of the European Union reaffirmed the significant potential of the circular economy for achieving sustainable growth and decreasing its dependency on non-renewable primary raw materials, while re-examining European consumption habits. The European Commission has recognised eco-design requirements – The Green Paper on “A European Strategy on Plastic Waste in the Environment”, published on 7 March 2013 – the industry partners’ practice of “planned technical obsolescence”. But the key issue remains “the prolif-

eration of single-use disposables and short-run products”. It follows from this, then, that if recycling is urgently needed, the reduction of waste must be first the first priority!”

In fact, according to the FNADE (Fédération française des professionnels du déchet), the lack of a common time frame in the reporting methods allows some countries to virtually inflate their performance to EUROSTAT, including laying claim to a no-waste-to-landfill result once they move through a MBT (Mechanical Biological Treatment) prior to land disposal. Germany, widely known as ‘the best student in the class’ with a recycling rate of 65% and no-waste-to-landfill, generates, nevertheless, more than 600 kg of waste per capita, per year, while Estonia, though recycling just 40%, produces only 279 kg of waste per capita and is therefore worthy of being held up as a good example.

Similarly, the “energy recovery” of plastics appears to be largely preferred as the hallmark of Germany where 60% of plastic waste is still incinerated at the expense of recycling. In order to change such a balance of power, the European Commission advocates the use of economic instruments such as environmental taxes that could prevent “a large surge in support of energy recovery”.

GAIA (Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives) also indicates that the incinerators of some member States of the European Union could burn more non-recyclable waste than their internal production at a national level: Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United-Kingdom already suffer from overcapacity in terms of incineration. This totally contradicts the proximity principle and increases the transborder shipments of waste that are destined for incineration, while generating unnecessary CO₂ emissions. “If the European Commission is to meet its commitments to restrict incineration exclusively to non-recyclable waste by 2020, the strategy should focus on the closing down of the incinerators and not the construction of new incinerators”, said GAIA.



During their 20th Summit, dated July 16 2018, China and the European Union signed a cooperation agreement on the circular economy, by sharing a project dedicated to “a sustainable economic growth, an efficient management of resources and a sustainable development at the global level” for the establishment of a “High-level dialogue”, focusing primarily on good practice with regard to waste management and circular economy funding, including eco-conception, eco-labels, all the green supply-chains... But, regardless of the implications of the Chinese decision to ban waste imports, it will be an opportunity for Europe to internalise the recycling of waste and consequently limit the environmental impact linked to their mode of transport and their handling.

It is therefore clear that, in order to stop being overwhelmed by the accumulation of waste, Europeans will have to radically alter their standard of living, if not substantially reduce it, considering that they are only at the beginning of a period of internal environmental impacts – pollution, greenhouse effects – which up until now have actually been externalised, like dust “swept under the carpet”.

The European countries that may grieve the loss of China’s waste treatment will probably have to take stringent measures of their own to ensure the profitability of their circular economy and in so doing, ramp up their capacities of reindustrialisation. Unfortunately, the recovery of electronic components – the re-using of materials for the manufacture of new electronic equipment – which has become more and more relevant with the development of cellphones and renewable energies, is only really making sense in some Asian countries where by almost all the world’s manufacturing production facilities are located. What is the potential, for instance, for our de-industrialised territories, with regard to the local use of waste from electric and electronic components?

In many economic areas, Europe must become aware of its poor track record, markedly deteriorated by a general de-industrialisation on a continental scale. This pernicious situation could continue in the

long term if this crisis doesn’t end up providing us with a salutary wake-up call. Primarily, owing to the fact that global comfort is a thing of the past, we should condemn the abandonment of political responsibility at many levels, be they regional, national or community based.

It is true to say that many jobs have been lost and will not be recovered in spite of the hopes based on hypothetical economic recoveries. In addition, there are growing fears that the significant efforts tardily made to protect or recover skills, trades and professional know-how and good practices, have been a waste of time. In the particular area of a still embryonic industry, as in other sectors – traditional or, on the contrary, promising sectors – the greatest danger is to be found in the unravelling of our knowledge and the potential loss of our capacity for innovation to the benefit of countries ready to conquer new markets and committed to “the big home run”.

With this new supply of raw materials originating from waste in several economic sectors, which have up until now been neglected and discredited, European countries need to promote the control of economic, social and environmental cohesion of their territories – without necessarily fearing being accused of protectionism – with a view to creating a maximum number of regional jobs.

The circular economy, if its true value is recognised and designed in a context of revitalisation, might just be the historical chance that Europe has to grasp like a ‘Kairos’... a fleeting opportunity that will not come knocking a second time. For the time being, China has taken command of the leadership and is at the helm of the globalization...

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