

Transcript of 'Waste and the Circular Economy'

Season 1, Episode 18, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business here at Lancaster University Management School.

I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Jan, today we're going to be heading to a place I know you lived, worked, I, I won't say studied, but researched for, for several years, and it's a place that I have a very great fondness in my heart for as well, we're going to St Andrews.

Jan: And St Andrews is heaven on earth. And, um, I met Lucy at St Andrews when we were both working there, and, um, was part of her academic journey as she looked at zero waste.

So it's really lovely, Lucy, to make the connection back again, and say hello.

Paul: Yes, because we should stress that there is more to St Andrews than golf, people walking around wearing tam o'shanter and, uh, drinking lots of whisky. There is indeed a world class university up there. And from there, where the Romans were far too scared to wander, uh, we welcome Dr Lucy Wishart the Director of Teaching in Management at the University of St Andrews Business School. Um, Lucy studied at St Andrews, the University of Lund in Sweden and the University of Edinburgh. And has advised private enterprise, NGOs and government on sustainability and the circular economy.

[Theme music]

Paul: Welcome, Lucy.

Lucy: Thank you very much for having me, both.

Paul: Do you want to tell us a little bit, Lucy, about your academic journey? Because I believe you started off studying law back in your days at the

University of Edinburgh. And you're now working in sustainability science and sustainability in business.

Lucy: Yeah, absolutely. So I did start at Edinburgh. I was a undergraduate in law and politics. So although I studied law I was always interested in, in governance and governing and, and law from that perspective.

And then when I was a third year undergraduate I spent a wonderful year in Oslo where aside from doing an awful lot of cross-country skiing, I discovered the work of Wangari Maathai. So Wangari Maathai, who ran the Green Belt movement in Kenya, she won the, the Nobel Peace Prize the year that I was in Oslo.

And so read her book. And suddenly my eyes were open to the idea that the environment was key to governing and key to organising society. And so when I came back to finish my degree at Edinburgh, I really wanted to work in environmental law and environmental policy.

And so I, I did a couple of years as a traineeship to train as a, a solicitor and it became very clear to me that the environment was still a very, very, very small aspect of legal work and thus very, very competitive. So I asked somebody what I needed to do in order to, to make my way in that area and they recommended that I go and get a degree, not in environmental law but in a much broader understanding of, of sustainability and environmental policy.

And I sort of fell upon this degree at Lund University in Sweden, which really changed my life. And it changed my life in that it completely changed my perspective on where solutions to environmental governance problems might come from.

And to my absolute surprise, because I hated political theory as an undergraduate, I found critical social theory, and the ideas that came from critical social theory, could be really challenging in terms of how we viewed environmental governance problems, how we viewed sustainability. Challenging assumptions and orthodoxies that that I had just taken for granted by using these social theory concepts to think differently about them.

And then I was able to continue that in my PhD at St Andrews by looking at zero waste. And I continue to do that in my work every day in teaching and research, using these different theories and concepts to challenge and think about new ways about thinking about how we might govern for sustainability.

Jan: What I really like is that there's a nice northern connection there. So Sweden is a country where sustainability science, so understanding sustainability in a really holistic sense, I wouldn't say mainstream because it's not mainstream for them and they've got, have to fight their own corner, but it's more mainstream than elsewhere.

So previously on our podcast we've had um Jean-Baptiste, uh, talk to us and he's got a sustainability science degree from Stockholm. But Lund is another excellent place where that broader educational basis is fostered and developed.

Lucy: Yeah, absolutely. And I think the, it's funny, because even in Oslo in 2004 I felt like I was kind of behind in realising that the environment was central to how we want to live our lives.

And then in Lund in 2009 I was thinking, oh my goodness all these people have already grasped this and are working on it. And it was really funny in some ways to, to come back to the UK where actually, suddenly, I was the person pushing people to think differently, rather than the person trying to catch up with those who were already imagining a world in a different way and imagining how we might govern worlds in a way that that took account of the environment.

Paul: And I believe it was at St Andrews that you met Jan, then. And uh, uh was Jan a positive influence, a negative influence? Was she wicked and improper, as has been suggested in previous episodes?

Jan: I knew this was going to come sooner or later. You know the answer Lucy, I sent the money ahead of time.

Lucy: It's not even the money, she took me for a scone for our first meeting which...

Paul: ...oh...

Lucy: ...yeah, that that was the winner for me. [Lucy and Paul laugh]

Any time you want to talk about sustainability and eat scones at the same time, I'm on board.

Paul: There we go, Jan. I'm glad to know that you you've been a positive influence, Jan. It surprises me, but I'm glad to know.

Jan: Pleased you're glad. I live to make you happy Paul.

But let's get on with the business that we're, we're going to chat about today. I'm going to start off with the word waste even though I know that at the end of our conversation we're not going to finish on waste.

Because you had a look at zero waste, which was a Scottish government policy, but also dealing with waste is something that a huge number of, um, governments and society and businesses and everyone is, is really worrying about. I also know that there's more nuance to what waste is.

So I was wondering if you can take that bad term [laughs] and, and that poorly defined term, and open it up for us and our listeners.

Lucy: For me, when I first started looking at waste, and I first started looking at waste in Sweden, in part because I was taken to a waste centre and I'd never been. I didn't even know where I would find a waste centre in Scotland or, or where that would, you know and it I realised that I'd lived my entire life without really knowing what happened to waste, and without really knowing what, what happens after things got picked up in, in a bin.

And, and so that was really intriguing to me, that this entire structure had been created where it was hidden away from me. And I think that interest still continues alongside waste. So even though we all have an idea about what waste is, and it's not something that's unfamiliar to us, it's also not something that we spend a lot of time thinking about, despite creating it every day and in every action that we do.

And I think that that's one of the things, the nuances of waste that perhaps is sometimes missing when we talk about it in zero waste terms. So I, I'm fall into the category of thinking that waste is inevitable, it's a part of all life. It's a part of every aspect of what we do. And part of the reason that waste is inevitable is because waste is a socially constructed category.

So whenever we seek to make categories, or order, in society there are going to be things that don't fit within those categories and order, and we're going to exclude things from it. And the things that we exclude is often what we consider as waste, so the stuff that we don't value.

And I really like the, the discard studies approach where they don't talk about waste, as much as discards. Because if you start to think of things as discards then that opens up our categories of waste much more. So it's no longer about

things that you throw in the bin, it's about things that you don't value, ideas that you no longer pick up, or think about again, it's much broader.

And through that I think we can start to identify how waste becomes something that is really related to ideas of power and value and, and who decides what is valuable and who decides what is waste, is, becomes really important. And I think that's quite often missing when we talk about waste particularly from a sustainability perspective.

Paul: What's the difference between waste and discard? In my mind the words might be almost interchangeable. So what, what is the difference between them?

Lucy: For me discard is, the way it's used in discard studies is, is potentially broader. And we might not think of things as, we might not think of people as waste for example. Whereas discard studies is interested in people that we decide do not fit particular categorisations and, and are therefore excluded from how we might choose to organise or, or govern things.

Um, so 'discard' opens up the door for more possibility for thinking about these ideas than 'waste' does.

Paul: So, so maybe what we traditionally consider of waste, as waste, would come under the banner of discard, but discard covers a much broader umbrella. I, I understand.

Lucy: Yeah

Paul: As much as I'm going to understand from the, the basis of a very short conversation, I'm not going to go off and suddenly claim to be a doctor of discard studies.

Jan: I'm not an expert either, but I know that Lucy's done a lot of work at thinking about governing, organising and waste/discards. And I was wondering if this might be a good time to ask you what kind of things have you uncovered from your work?

Lucy: I guess the thing that I focus on the most at the moment with is, that I'm interested in how we challenge how we waste and discard. Because even, the, the concept of, of waste doesn't necessarily relate to sustainability. But, equally, clearly the way we use things in in contemporary society in terms of materials, is not good for the planet.

And so we have to think about how we are waste, wasting and discarding in a different way. And that's what I'm interested in. And particularly I'm interested in the idea of reusing. So not where we're using waste material in a different way, but actually where we're deciding things are not waste in the first place, but they're passed on and we're extending the life of things.

But not just related to that, but more broadly, whether you decide to make something from waste into something else. Whether you decide not to waste in the first place by prolonging the life of something. All of these processes that are about addressing the environmentally harmful waste, they all involve so much work. And that is my, my, the main focus I think of my research, my main takeaway.

Sometimes that work is physical labour, often it's really dirty labour, often it's undervalued labour or, or even unpaid labour, in certain, um, cases. And, and we probably all recognise that, in terms of our understandings of people that we, we see in society working with waste.

I think where we, what we don't think about is the emotional labour that's involved. And the emotional labour not only from the people working with waste, but also as us as individuals trying not to waste. So the amount of effort that goes into thinking about whether you're going to throw something away, or take something to a charity shop, or do you have to clean this or, or repair this. Or maybe your great grandmother gave you something that you then don't want to pass on a different way. And there's, there's so many interesting ideas around care and love and that, that come into that and there's a lot of emotional labour involved in that.

And then, I guess, the third thing related to that that I'm really interested in is how much of that labour is hidden? But also how much labour goes into making that labour hidden? So we pretend that, that, or we see reuse and, and second hand as being great for the environment and, and it's something really positive, and oh, yes we should absolutely do that more without really unpicking how much work has to go in to ensuring that these practices take place and, and who's doing that labour.

Jan: Absolutely. And I, I think both at um St Andrews, because I know there's schemes there, we've got the same scheme at Lancaster as well, and I'm sure many other universities do as well.

As students leave at the end of the year or at the end of their studies, there's places where they can put materials that they no longer need, and don't want to drag back to Mum and Dad's house or to take overseas or whatever. And it creates a, a pool of tables and chairs and all sorts of things that the new incoming students can obtain either for no cost or very low cost.

But equally that practice involves people clearing out rooms, um looking at materials to make sure they are okay to reuse and pass on. Storing them, then displaying them and bringing them back into productive life again. So I think that's, for a university perspective, that's a really good example of reuse, but it, you can say reuse, but there's a lot of activity and work that sits behind actually achieving that.

Lucy: Yes, absolutely, and I think that happens at university but also if we think of the UK charity shops for example, that's what my latest research has been on. Similar things happen in those places.

So when we drop stuff off at a charity shop or when we go and purchase something at a charity shop, there's so much work that happens in the middle, between the dropping off and, and then going in and picking up.

And very often it's done by volunteers. It's very often done in back rooms in the charity shop, so you're not seeing it. So even though the drop off and, and pickup point is the same place, it's still being hidden out of sight and there's a lot of labour moving it out of the way.

Something else that I think comes into reuse, in particular, but probably also recycling, is how important it is for the people doing that job to present that as a positive interaction. Quite often students leave at the end of semester a lot of not very valuable material. We probably could call it waste.

There is very little you can do with a pot that's got two inches of porridge stuck to the bottom of it, that's been there for months. But that also has to be accepted and then, then the people accepting it make the decision about what happens with it. Because if you were to reject that straight away then that creates doubt in the mind of the donators, and they suddenly don't donate and it becomes a much more complicated interaction for them. So the decision is just to accept that and then do the filtering afterwards.

And the same happens in charity shops, people come in with, with huge bags of clothes that you're never going to sell because people are not wearing early

'90s shell suits, for example, in parts of Fife. But yet you still have to accept it with grace and, and excitement and thanks because that person that feels that they're doing something good.

Um and so that's, that's a really good example I think of the emotional labour that is involved in these practices as, as we try and present them as something light I guess.

Paul: Before I go on to my next point, I will point out I have come across neighbourhoods, not that long ago, and indeed lots of people, who do wear what looks like early '90s shell suits. And I'm told that certain things like popper trousers, where you have the little buttons going all the way up the side, like tracksuit bottoms, they're coming back into fashion. So you know everything's going to come back again. If those charity shops just keep hold of them for another 20 years, worth a fortune.

But moving on from shell suits and things. And this might seem a question with an obvious answer, but trying to tie in sustainability in ways, which you say, you know you say isn't necessary the obvious thing there, is, could there be or is there, even, such a thing as sustainable waste or sustainable discard?

Lucy: Yes, I think there is, and I'm going to draw on the work of discard studies to describe it. If we think of waste as being an inevitable factor of, of how we live, we can still be intentional about the waste that we're creating, and intentional about the materials that we are using.

So Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky, in their book on Discard Studies, talk about wasting well. And I think that's a really interesting idea and concept. So waste is an inevitability in some senses, we will always create systems that have things that are outside of that system.

But we have to be thoughtful about what that is, that's outside the system. What is it, that is the waste? What's going to happen to it? And who is dealing with it and who, who's working with it? And then, then you can, to me that is wasting sustainably or, or wasting well. There's thought behind it.

And one of the problems that we have at the moment, or why we waste unsustainably, is it's very much an afterthought. As I said at the beginning when, when I went to Sweden and suddenly I realised that there were all these processes happening that I'd never been aware of. We need to make that

more apparent and we need to make people understand what the consequences of, of living in a particular way to create waste might be.

Jan: When you talk about materials it brings me on to thinking about circular economy, and circular economy thinking. And, um, I was involved, um, quite a few years ago in the zero waste think tank that the Scottish government put together. But then not long after that they moved to a circular economy strategy.

So I'm wondering if you could introduce what circular economy thinking would be and what does it mean in the context of thinking about discard and waste.

Lucy: Err, yes. So [laughs] how, and I feel like I, as somebody who works with the circular economy every day, I probably should be better at having some way to describe it that is snappy.

Um, but the, the problem with describing it in a snappy way is it's, that it's a really contested term. And it's used by so many different actors and by so many different sectors in slightly nuanced and different ways. And, and that equally applies in academic work as well, academics also employ it in different ways.

And some people have suggested that that makes it completely un-useful because it's so broad. And some people have suggested well actually that's where its value comes, in that, that it does, it is so broad that you can use it in different ways to challenge people in a way that is non-confrontational, because they've already got on board with the idea of the circular economy.

Which might be a similar way that some people have described another word that is central to the work of Pentland. So it's certainly echoing some of the things that are, are levied at sustainability. And I think the thing about circular economy being a contested term is the idea of not wanting to waste materials unnecessarily or being able to, to expand and extend the life of things can be used in a really uncritical way.

You can want to, to take materials to increase economic growth. And you can want to take materials to increase productivity. And you can use that idea to reinforce existing ways of organising in a way that is slightly more sustainable than, than currently, that, that's perfectly um acceptable under the circular economy.

But equally you can use the circular economy in a way that really challenges some of the existing practices we have about how we organise society. And I think one of the reasons that I focus on reuse within the circular economy as opposed to recycling or energy from waste, for example, is that for me the practice of reuse is where some of those big challenges really come through.

Reuse challenges our idea of ownership, because we have to pass something on to somebody else, we don't own something indefinitely. It challenges our, our concepts of value. So it's not valuable to me but that doesn't mean it's not valuable elsewhere, or there's value could be created.

And I think it's really well connected to the idea of there being multiple different economies working at any one time. So reuse is a practice that isn't new and it, it has occurred, you know, throughout society, probably for forever and in different ways, and in different guises, and not always captured within what we would think of as economic activity, although it is about exchange of value.

And so I think that, that by exploring that practice and seeing how it works it really challenges how we might organise other parts of our economy too.

Paul: Just to look at, when you talk about reuse there, Lucy, do you also include things like repurposing? So something being used again but for a totally different way, or something being broken down into constituent parts because some of the constituent parts can be reused in a different way, or for a different purpose.

Lucy: Sometimes, not very consistent in how I usually use. [Lucy and Paul laugh]

For me I tend to say something used in its original form, it might not be for its original purpose, but it tends to be in its original form. So repurposing, like upcycling, for example, is often how we think of reuse, um, things.

But I'm thinking more of, of a table stays a table, a cup stays a cup, piece of copper piping stays a piece of copper piping.

Paul: I, I guess what I was thinking of as well, was along the lines of, say, electronic devices which contain certain, you know metals that are scarce, certain materials that once they've been used there's not that, there's only a, you know, an infinite, not there's not an infinite supply, rather, and therefore they might be able to take out certain parts of these devices, machines and

then melt them down or just totally reuse them again in a different way, that kind of thing.

Lucy: So I would probably categorise that more as recycling, than I would reuse.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Lucy: So there's a, there's a higher level of processing required to extract the value, or prolong the value of that item. And certainly for some items you can see how that would be needed, and it's needed as part of a circular economy. So you're not going to have a circular economy entirely based on reuse, you're not going to have a circular economy entirely based on recycling.

Paul: Yeah,, that that was the thing where I was kind of trying to figure out where the line is drawn between reuse and recycling. If you take an element out of something and reuse it, is that reuse? Because recycling in my mind is totally breaking something down and then making it into something new. But maybe it's taking a part out of something and using that part in its original way but as part of something different.

Jan: I think what's really interesting about the conversation you two are having is the nuance in terms of how these things fit together and what they mean. The other thing that strikes me from how you've um just described some of the circular economy, is it, it's materials plus energy.

So if it's not people sorting and cleaning and what not, you know, human energy, there's a lot of energy impact about how we repurpose, reuse, recycle materials as well. And so that's an important component to this whole area of discussion.

Lucy: I think when I first started looking at waste, I used to distinguish myself from climate researchers. So I was a sustainability researcher interested in waste, not interested in climate change. But clearly both things are intertwined. And clearly you cannot be a sustainability researcher interested in waste who is not interested in climate change, because the, the two are, you know, how, whether it's through contributions of how we deal with waste to greenhouse gases, and, and we know that that food waste has huge, um, contributions towards carbon, um, or whether it is how we choose to deal with that waste then has consequences for the energy use. Absolutely.

Paul: So a lot of the things you said there do appear to be challenges for what's making it difficult for designing a circular economy. Are there any other issues that that provide difficulties when it comes to putting a circular economy in place?

Lucy: Oh my goodness, have we got a podcast or a podcast series, [laughs] for we could discuss the challenges. [Paul laughs]

But I think what we're seeing more and more is that these are, it comes back to what I said right at the beginning about what, deciding when something is waste or is of value is absolutely linked to power.

And it's linked to power about, and, and therefore politics, which kind of is probably why I'm still you know I'm, it's going back right to what we were saying at the beginning, I started out being interested in governance.

And, and the circular economy has, to an extent, managed to bubble away without intersecting with that, those sociopolitical elements for a number of years.

And I say that with a big caveat, because I think for those working at the front line of, of circular economy activities, so whether it's recycling or waste picking or anything like that, they are absolutely aware that these are political issues.

So politics and governance and power become really, have become even more important I think in the circular economy and, and not just at the coalface, also within organisations. They start to see that the low hanging fruit, perhaps, of the circular economy where you're doing a little bit more recycling of your material, of the materials created by you and the, you're managing your material stuff is, is only going to get us to a certain level of the circular economy.

And actually we really start, having to start having bigger conversations about deeper change.

[Theme music]

Paul: Well Jan that seems to me that, a good time to, maybe, pause our conversation with Lucy. I think we discussed brilliantly there things such as the circular economy, uh, discard studies, waste.

And how about we come back for a little bonus of episode later in the week where we can discuss the work that Lucy's been doing with regards to policy,

working with government and the various things about, uh, Scottish policy and sustainability?

Jan: I think that's a really good idea. My only sadness is we haven't had a scone yet.

[Lucy laughs]

Paul: Between now and the next episode why don't we have ourselves a scone?

Jan: I agree.

Paul: But until then thank you very much, Lucy Wishart. And we will be back later in the week with our next episode of Transforming Tomorrow.

If you do have any questions on any of the issues we've in any of our podcasts, please do email pentlandcentre@lancaster.ac.uk.

But until next time, I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.