

The Fourth “R”
by Ole Hendrickson
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It seems that repair has become a lost art. Do people darn socks anymore, repair shoes, mend holes in clothes, fix broken toys or sports equipment, or do they just toss them and buy new ones? When the transmission goes in your car, do you fix it or junk it?

Economists trivialize repair and maintenance, denigrating them as low-wage service sector activities, less economically important than resource extraction and manufacturing.

Environmentalists aren't much better. They ignore repair, speaking only of “Three R’s” (reduce, reuse, recycle) in the limited context of household waste such as containers, cardboard and kitchen scraps. This perpetuates the myth that reducing waste means a poorer lifestyle - buying less, getting your clothes from the second-hand store, and spending your time flattening tin cans.

In truth, the “Four R's” should be viewed as the economy’s main engine of jobs and productivity, and the environment’s saving grace. Repair and maintenance sustain us, mentally, physically, and economically. There is real satisfaction in fixing things. And so many jobs are provided in maintaining roads, cars, water, and sewer systems, replacing roofs and windows, fixing broken appliances, mending shoes and sharpening skates, and so forth.

Our bodies need maintenance and repair as well. Right now every cell in your body is busy taking compounds apart and putting them back together. This is how life works. When an organism dies, every building block is reused.

By contrast, there is an immense amount of waste in our fossil-fuel-powered industrial society. We worship the creation of new goods and despise maintenance and repair. Bureaucrats in Natural Resources Canada promote ever-increasing extraction of raw materials and oppose European Union efforts to generate more economic activity per unit resource consumed, even as landfills overflow with our discarded goods.

Do we really want Canada to be a global champion of waste? Must all Canadians hew wood, draw water, and mine tar sands?

Profit-seeking companies extract natural resources as fast as possible while prices are high on international markets. But as Canadian Auto Workers economist Jim Stanford points out, “the aggregate result is a vast waste of resources, and deteriorating productivity, that Canadians will sorely regret once the global commodity price boom has run its course.”

Extracting natural resources, and turning them into useful manufactured goods, are essential activities. But the service sector (which includes a myriad of repair and maintenance activities) is key to productivity – getting maximum value from resources. Let's acknowledge this and design things that can easily be repaired and whose components can be separated and returned to the resource stream when they reach the end of their useful service. We also need to identify components that can't safely be reused – like certain plastics – and treat them as hazardous waste, rather than mixing them with lawn clippings and food scraps.

Let's erase the artificial distinctions between the resource, manufacturing, and service sectors. Businesses can compete to add value throughout the product life cycle. Governments can promote product

stewardship and labeling standards, classify harmful plastics as hazardous, and tax wastes. Householders can buy things that their grandchildren will want to own.

Ray Anderson founded the carpet company Interface Inc. in 1994. He called himself a “radical industrialist”. He asked, “If nature designed an industrial process, what might it look like?” He created a company whose goals are “to run on renewable energy, to eliminate waste from our operations, to recycle and then reuse the materials from our products.”

Let’s create an economy that works with nature by focusing on sustainability as an economic goal. And let’s add “Repair” to the “Three R’s, recognizing it as the core of economic and ecological well-being.

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