

Waving the Banana at Capitalism:
Freegans and the Politics of Waste in New York City

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“The decay spreads over the State, and the sweet smell is a great sorrow on the land. Men who can graft the trees and make the seed fertile and big can find no way to let the hungry people eat their produce. Men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system whereby the fruits may be eaten...

The works of the roots, of the vines, of the trees, must be destroyed to keep up the price, and this is the saddest, bitterest thing of all. Carloads of oranges dumped on the ground. The people came for miles to take the fruit, but this could not be. How would they buy oranges at twenty cents a dozen if they could drive out and pick them up? And men with hoses squirt kerosene on the oranges, and they are angry at the crime, angry at the people who have come to take the fruit...

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success...”

- John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)

Preface

This book continues a process that began in 2007. That summer, I read a *New York Times* article—“Not Buying It”—that explored the ideologies and practices of a new, and supposedly growing, movement of people called “freegans.” Freeganism at the time seemed to mean a great deal of different things, but what was most clear from the article was that freegans ate out of the garbage.

In retrospect, I was probably in a demographic sliver particularly susceptible to the freegan message. I was an affluent white male attending an elite private college. At the same time, I was a recently-converted vegan, growing increasingly attuned to the ethical and political implications of my consumption choices. And, it should be noted, I had a six-inch tall Mohawk—a minor detail, but one that hints at an alternative streak that primed me for a “deviant” activity like “dumpster-diving.”¹ Perhaps that same hairstyle enabled many freegans to see past my Princeton pedigree and accept me as an authentic fellow activist.

Nevertheless, when I first traveled to Brooklyn from my home in New Jersey to attend a freegan.info “trash tour,” I was not anticipating any long-term involvement. Slightly concerned about whether freegans would be welcoming to a newcomer, I convinced a friend to join me. I pessimistically thought that we would spend a few hours searching out rotten apple cores and potato peelings and then come home more-or-less empty-handed. I’m sure many people embark on their first freegan forays with the same mix of trepidation and low expectations, and I imagine that some readers are starting this book with similar sentiments.

¹ Technically speaking, “Dumpster” is a trademarked term, referring to the “Dempster Dumpster” invented by the Dempster brothers in 1935 (U.S. Trademark 71,773,015). Scrupulously capitalizing the word throughout this book to respect the patent seems not quite in keeping with the spirit of freeganism, though.

Like so many of the characters in this book, what I saw on that night's trash tour—and again, and again, and again as I returned in the ensuing years—was waste on a scale that boggled my mind and defied easy explanation. Or, perhaps, the biggest problem was that what I saw didn't seem like waste at all. After all, “waste” is supposed to be dirty, rotten, useless, and contaminated; the food we found, on the other hand, surpassed in quality that which I routinely ate in my school's dining hall. It is this sharp contrast between what I expected to find in the garbage and what I in fact encountered that drove my subsequent involvement in freeganism. The two concepts that anchor the analysis in this book—that of the “ex-commodity” and the “fetish of waste”—were right in front of me from that first trash tour, even if it took me years to be able to fully articulate them.

I continued to come into New York on a regular basis from 2007 to 2009. As time went on, I moved from merely attending freegan events to taking part in freegan working groups and organizational meetings and joining freegans as they participated in a range of protests and actions organized by New York's activist scene. In 2009, I interviewed twenty freegan.info participants—nearly all of the people who were regularly involved with the group at the time. In 2012, I returned briefly to New York on three occasions, and conducted follow-up interviews with seven of the freegans I had interviewed in 2009, some of whom had since left the movement. I have supplemented my research by analyzing and coding nearly a decade of freegan.info e-mail list-serve archives and online literature. In addition, I have conducted interviews with freegans elsewhere in the U.S. and Western Europe, as well as a year of participant-observations of a freegan-affiliated movement, Food Not Bombs, in the East Bay outside of San Francisco.

Other experiences round out my understanding of freeganism and waste, but don't fit neatly under the heading of deliberate research. I've been involved in a wide range of activism around food for the last decade: as a campaigner for animal rights and veganism in New Jersey and England; as a supporter of social movements against waste in Berkeley, California and Paris, France; as a volunteer for a food redistribution charity in Oxford; and as a paid employee of a food distribution charity in Arizona. While I've never considered myself "hardcore" enough for the label freegan to really apply, I have gradually incorporated freegan practices of limited consumption and dumpster-diving into my daily life. I've gone through months-long periods where I spent virtually \$0 on food; I've traveled thousands of miles for free by hitch-hiking; I've partaken of the "sharing economy" through couch-surfing and freecycle; I've learned how to repair my bike and sew up my clothes. These actions were not entirely, or even primarily, taken with scholarly intent, but they inflect this book throughout (as well as hint at some of my biases on the subject).

This book is intended as more than a piece of journalistic reporting: the freegans have already received ample media attention, and there is no shortage of descriptions of who freegans are and what they do. My goal, instead, is to put my close, on-the-ground observations of the freegan.info community in dialog with theories about capitalism, waste, and social movements. This approach of challenging and reconstructing theory through ethnography is known as the "extended case" method.² Using "theory" is not an attempt to obfuscate freeganism in a fog of academic jargon. On the contrary, I see theory as a way to extend the lessons of freeganism further—to show that the study of freeganism illuminates far more than just one peculiar group

² Burawoy (1998).

of people in New York City. The more arcane theoretical references join links to various studies about issues of concern to the freegans in the endnotes.

Before diving in, I want to make explicit one crucial caveat. Freegan.info is the most organized and visible group of self-identified freegans in the world. As they are careful to point out on their website, however, “We do not speak for all freegans worldwide, nor do we claim to have better knowledge than anyone else on what freeganism is.”³ It follows that a book about freegan.info cannot claim to be a book about all “freegans” (even if, for convenience, I often use the labels “freegan.info participants” and “freegans” interchangeably). Even within freegan.info, there is no consensus about what freeganism means or who freegans are; people active in the group before I arrived or after I left might find some of the characters the same, but the group dynamics I describe completely different. Although I attempt to make both the diversity and changing nature of freegan.info clear, I am ultimately forced to come to my own conclusions about what freeganism actually is and acknowledge that these conclusions are not universally shared. There are many books that could be written about freeganism: this one, focusing on the anti-capitalist politics of waste, is only one possibility.

³ Freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/about-us/

INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF A TOMATO

On a cold night in December 2008, a slightly over-ripe tomato sits inside a non-descript black plastic trash bag on a sidewalk outside a D’Agostino Supermarket in Murray Hill, a wealthy residential district east of midtown Manhattan. A sticker on its side, reading “Grown in Mexico,” hints at the long trajectory that brought it to the curb.

To understand how this tomato came to New York City, a good starting point is 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Canada, and Mexico came into effect.¹ In preparation for NAFTA, Mexico began to phase out long-standing trade protections for its agricultural sector. As tariffs lowered, Mexican markets were flooded with heavily subsidized U.S. grains, most notably corn.² Falling grain prices and the withdrawal of state support for peasant agriculture pushed hundreds of thousands of farmers off of the communal lands they had won during the Mexican revolution and worked for centuries.³ Some became temporary laborers on huge tomato plantations, working twelve hours a day to earn a meager \$10 wage.⁴

Tomatoes grown on industrial farms are picked while still green, and are ripened and preserved through the application of dozens of different chemicals and pesticides. They are then sent north: in the peak growing season, over one hundred trucks full of tomatoes cross the border

¹ The narrative provided in this section is drawn primarily from Barndt (2008), although other citations are given where applicable.

² Between 1995 and 2011, the US government gave over \$81 billion to growers of corn alone (Environmental Working Group 2014).

³ Pechlaner and Otero (2010).

⁴ (Wilkinson 2013). Others went north to the United States. Many migrant laborers end up working in agriculture in the US as well, such as in the tomato fields of Florida, where they are paid around \$60 a day and are kept in conditions of “virtual slavery” (Estabrook 2011). Despite working amidst an abundance of food, migrant laborers are several times more likely to be food insecure than the average American (Minkoff-Zern 2014).

each day.⁵ These tomatoes are an emblematic instance of the increasing distance our food travels from farm to fork—and the rising carbon emissions that result. Indeed, although we might think of tomatoes as a product of sun, soil, and water, virtually everything used to raise the crop—fertilizers, pesticides, plastic bins, fuels for trucks and tractors—is petroleum-based.

The average tomato today contains 62% less Calcium, 19% less Niacin, and 30% less Vitamin C that just a few decades ago.⁶ The products of industrial tomato farms are uniform, tasteless, and nutritionally devoid—because they were bred to be that way. Although tomato seeds originated in Mexico, the hybridized and genetically-engineered varieties grown there today are primarily own by the multinational corporations, like Monsanto, that increasingly dominate our food system.⁷ In the United States, ten agribusiness conglomerates account for half of all food sales.⁸

This tomato passed through many hands as it was processed, packaged, packed and unpacked, and eventually put on display. Nearly one-in-six employed Americans works in the production, distribution, marketing, and preparation of food.⁹ Like many jobs in the burgeoning service economy, though, food service jobs are poorly paid, unreliable, and offer few opportunities for advancement. In one survey, only 13% of employees in the food sector reported earning a living wage.¹⁰ Compared to those in other sectors, these workers were more likely to be employed part-time, to lack health insurance, and to need welfare benefits.¹¹

⁵ Barndt (2008:189).

⁶ (Estabrook 2011:x).

⁷ (Barndt 2008:15). For a discussion of tomato breeding, see (Powell et al. 2012).

⁸ (Lyson and Raymer 2000:199).

⁹ (Food Chain Workers Alliance 2012).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. Although unionized employees—including those at D’Agostino—almost certainly fare better.

Embedded within this tomato, and virtually every other item on the shelves of the supermarket, is a history of human exploitation and ecological harm. Yet the average consumer in the supermarket doesn't see the uprooted laborer in Mexico, the greenhouse-gas emitting truck that brought the tomato to New York, or even the underpaid worker in the grocery store back room. Instead, he or she sees only the products themselves: the 40,000 different items on offer in a typical supermarket.¹² These goods are symbols of America's historically unprecedented superabundance of cheap food—the average family in 2012 spent only 10% of disposable income on food, nearly the lowest figure ever recorded¹³—and the high social and environmental cost at which that abundance comes.

In recent years, though, activists, journalists, and scholars have begun to expose the reality of our food system. Bestselling books like Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* or Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* have revealed the problematic paths that our food takes to reach us. A wide range of social movements, too, have made increasingly audible calls for reform in the food system, demanding that consumers have access to food which is local, organic, fair-trade, and free from genetically modified organisms.

For all this growing interest in where our food *comes from*, though, there has been comparatively little attention to where it actually *goes*.¹⁴ In fact, as one author observed, “the food production/consumption chain has become so long, complex, and tangled that no one

¹² (Food Marketing Institute 2012).

¹³ Up slightly from a low of 9.5% in 2008. By comparison, the figure for 1960 was 17.5% (Clausson 2013).

¹⁴ The superabundance of publications of food production and the paucity of examinations of food waste—at least until recently (see, e.g., Evans, Campbell, and Murcott 2012)—highlights this point. Despite writing an entire book on tomato production and distribution, Barndt (2008) devotes only two paragraphs to what happens to tomatoes after they reach their destination. For a theoretical critique of perspectives that take “consumption” to be the end-point of commodity chains, see (Crang et al. 2013; Hetherington 2004; Lepawsky and Billah 2011).

knows exactly where [a] tomato goes.”¹⁵ Then again, whatever the location, the ending point of the tomato’s story would seem to be obvious: it gets eaten. For most of us, the notion that food should feed people—not go to waste—is a powerful moral imperative. In a country with 17.6 million food-insecure households,¹⁶ it seems intuitive that any excess food surely must get donated to the needy. But as this tomato sitting outside D’Agostino shows, the story of where our food winds up is more complicated—and more disturbing.

Perhaps an employee spotted a blemish on the tomato while putting it on the shelf. Or maybe the store sold fewer tomatoes this week than expected. It could have received a new shipment earlier than it planned. The tomato may simply have been placed at the bottom of the display and thus been passed over by shoppers. Or, it is possible that, out of fear of ever showing an empty display, the store *deliberately* stocked more tomatoes than it predicted people would buy. City Harvest, the largest organization recovering and distributing surplus food in New York City, claims that D’Agostino is a “great partner”¹⁷ that donates significant quantities of food. Whatever the reason, though, this tomato was not bought, not donated, and not composted—it was wasted: put in a garbage bag and placed on the curb.

This tomato’s story is not uncommon. In the United States, up to 40% of total food production is lost without being consumed.¹⁸ From virtually any angle, the scale of food waste is

¹⁵ (Barndt 2008:262)

¹⁶ (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, and Carlson 2013:v).

¹⁷ This statement was made by a representative of City Harvest during an interview with the author on March 2, 2009.

¹⁸ The last U.S. government estimate of food loss used estimates for 260 separate commodities (see Muth et al. 2011) to come to a figure of 31% for 2010 (Buzby, Wells, and Hyman 2014), which is up from the 27% calculated based on 1995 data (Kantor et al. 1997). These estimates are conservative, however, because they do not include pre-harvest, on-the-farm, or farm-to-retail losses, nor do they include some commodity groups like soy milk.

astonishing. According to conservative estimates, total food loss during harvest, processing, distribution, and consumption comes to over 160 billion pounds per year.¹⁹ In 2008, Americans wasted \$4.1 billion worth of tomatoes alone—and with them, the approximately 8.9 *million* hours of labor and 15 *billion* gallons of water that went into their production.²⁰ While the market value of America’s food waste—\$197.7 billion²¹—is itself shocking, this foods’ potential “value” to meet human needs is even more striking. 141 trillion—the total number of calories lost at retail and consumer levels alone each year—is a next to meaningless figure, thanks to its almost unfathomable scale.²² A better way to put it is that, by one calculation, Americans dispose of enough calories of good food each year to bring the diets of every undernourished person in the world up to an appropriate level.²³ Yet estimates suggest that less than 10% of grocery stores’ edible excess gets donated.²⁴ Almost all of the rest makes its way to landfills, where it spews methane, a particularly potent globe-warming gas.²⁵

Looking at the overall discrepancy between food consumed and food produced, Hall et al. (2009) calculate that 40% of the calories produced in 2003 were wasted, up from 30% in 1974. On the basis of direct analysis of the composition of municipal solid waste, Jones (2005) claims that the actual figure is between 40 and 50%, though that figure has not been subject to peer review. If, following Stuart (2009:139), we consider the fact that a mere 30% of the calories we *feed* to livestock are actually returned in meat, dairy, and eggs as a form of waste, then food losses reach far above 50% of the available food supply.

The discrepancies are the result of differing assumptions and methodologies, but they are also emblematic of a broader absence of systematic collection of data on waste in the United States (see MacBride 2012) and the reticence of businesses in the food chain to provide a full accounting of their losses (Stuart 2009).

¹⁹ (Bloom 2010:ii).

²⁰ (Buzby et al. 2011:507).

²¹ (Venkat 2011:441).

²² Buzby et al. (2014:18)

²³ (Stuart 2009:83).

²⁴ (Bloom 2010:179), although this is a generous figure. Donation rates at every other point of the food supply chain are actually lower, leading to an estimated overall rate of only 3% (Griffin, Sobal, and Lyson 2009:77). Sadly, donations may actually be higher in the U.S. than in other

Examining the trajectory of this tomato, then, reveals a different set of truths about our food system. It is not just that the food we buy has a hidden history of exploitation behind it. It is also that the food which actually gets sold and consumed is shadowed by an enormous number of products—like this tomato—which are *never* sold, *never* consumed, but are simply wasted. Yet while the average consumer in the D’Agostino might spend a long time perusing the store’s shelves, he or she likely won’t think twice about the lumpy black trash bags of food outside. Even if that shopper looked inside them, he or she would probably assume that the food in it was dirty or rotten—even though much of it is just as fresh and just as nutritious as the food within the store. Accustomed to thinking that anything in the garbage must be polluted and valueless, few of us see the massive wealth of one-time commodities that, in modern capitalism, ends up wasted.

The Anti-Capitalist

Shortly before the garbage truck arrives to begin the tomato’s long journey to a landfill in one of the twelve different states to which New York City sends its waste, the black plastic bag is untied. A hand reaches in, brushing aside some sodden cardboard packaging and a few scattered leaves of lettuce. It reaches the tomato, feeling it to see if it is still firm.

That hand is attached to a thirty-year-old man named Adam. Adam has shoulder-length, shaggy hair and an unkempt beard; he is wearing a pair of loose, torn jeans and a stained, oversized hoodie. Even before pulling out the tomato, he is already laden with bags of food: slightly soft zucchini from outside another grocery store a few blocks away, an assortment of

Western capitalist countries, some of which have no systematic donation programs (Fernandez, Brittain, and Bennett 2011:1783).

²⁵ Only 4% of food waste is composted or recovered for waste-to-energy plants (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2013:6). For discussion of the role of methane in U.S. greenhouse-gas emissions, see (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2011b).

day-old bagels rescued from a nearby bakery, and some still-warm Indian food recovered from a neighborhood restaurant. In a city in which as many as 41,000 people are homeless on a given night²⁶—at least some of whom rescue discarded food to survive—there seems to be little out of the ordinary about this scene.

Indeed, many aspects of Adam's lifestyle put him on the extreme margins of society. Adam claims not to have bought food in thirteen years. Actually, by his own account, Adam doesn't buy much of anything, aside from the occasional subway pass, phone card, or box of baking soda for toothpaste. All told, he says he survives on less than \$1,000 a year. When I asked him about taxes, he quipped back, "No income, no taxes." Even if he did have an income, he would be hard to find: he lives without a cell-phone or government-issued ID. For most of 2008, Adam slept rent-free on a mat in a windowless and poorly ventilated basement underneath an old industrial warehouse in Brooklyn. Aside from a short stint as a security guard, Adam says he hasn't worked for pay since he graduated from high school.

Adam insists that he hasn't arrived at this lifestyle by choice, but he wasn't driven to it by poverty either. As he explained to me during an interview, "I've always thought that spending money unnecessarily, when vital needs are unmet for the world's less fortunate, seemed frivolous and irresponsible," adding, "for as long as I can remember, I've felt like I had to reduce my impact and live as non-violently as possible. I've basically always been an anarchist, I just didn't know the word." Adam grew up in a conservative household in a New Jersey suburb, the son of a pediatrician and a schoolteacher for gifted-and-talented youth. When I asked him where his radical views came from—since they apparently were not imparted by his parents—he responded with a well-rehearsed litany of factors, a sign that he had been asked this question

²⁶ (Markee 2011).

countless times: “I’m a direct descendant of Holocaust victims. Growing up, my moral role models were comic-book superheroes and Gandhi. I’ve always had a contempt for formal schooling and the inane garbage that’s taught through it. And my closest relationships as a kid were with non-human animals.”

This last point helps explain why Adam went vegetarian at age eight and vegan at twelve, although he told me he would have done so earlier “if it weren’t for parental arm-twisting.” This intense compassion is still evident today. One afternoon, I helped Adam clean out his cluttered living space. As I moved to take a bag of trash outside to the dumpster, he grabbed my arm and exclaimed, “Holy shit, there are flies in there!” He then spent fifteen minutes meticulously taking the insects that were still alive outside of the trash. His concern for animals deepened, he said, when he began conducting personal research into agriculture, thinking, for a time, that he would move to a farm. But, he explains, “I realized that even plant farming, even *organic* plant farming, even *local organic* plant farming, involves a ton of animal exploitation. It hit me that buying *any* food was morally unacceptable. Dumpster diving just came to me naturally after that.” Since then, Adam has been, in effect, living off of the detritus of an economic system he despises.

Adam got his start in political outreach by going door-to-door through his neighborhood campaigning against the use of backyard “bug-zappers.” After high school, he eschewed college and became a full-time environmental campaigner. From one perspective, Adam’s entire life can be read as an ongoing struggle against animal abuse, environmental degradation, and human exploitation. At the same time, his politics are also a rejection of the most common ways that activists, social movements, and politicians have *responded* to these abuses. In a society where claims about the importance of protecting the environment are “ambient—as pervasive...as the

air we breathe,”²⁷ Adam is a disenchanted prophet at the margins, relentlessly insisting to anyone who will listen that “green capitalism” or “ethical consumerism” cannot save us from ecological catastrophe.²⁸

For example, despite still adhering to its dietary strictures, Adam is scathing in his critique of veganism. Speaking about the proliferation of high-end vegan restaurants and specialty vegan clothing stores in hipster-saturated Brooklyn, Adam pronounced that “Veganism is a bourgeois ideology that worships consumption.” Most animal rights activists, he explained, have an unfounded faith in the capacity of individuals to effect social change through buying one product over another. The same could be said for purchasers of environmentally-friendly detergents or organic-cotton t-shirts. Consumer activism, in Adam’s eyes, does not grapple with the ecologically-destructive logic of endless growth which lies at the heart of capitalism. This logic, he notes, is made visible by our economic system’s never-ending generation of waste.

Dumpster diving, for Adam, isn’t about perfecting the ethics of his own personal lifestyle. Instead, Adam views dumpster diving as an instrument which allows him to meet his needs without spending his days working for pay, which frees up his time for political activism. For the last decade, Adam has been the main force behind the Wetlands Activism Collective, an offshoot of the Wetlands Nightclub, which closed in 2001. Other activists I spoke to recalled that, back when the bar was still open, Adam would stay in the Wetlands back office during concerts, working late into the night organizing boycotts of companies that abused animals or violated indigenous peoples’ rights. As part of his work with Global Justice for Animals and the Environment and Trade Justice New York—two groups he founded and runs largely single-

²⁷ (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011:60).

²⁸ The term “disenchanted prophets” is from the late great Alberto Melucci (1996:1).

handedly—Adam was arrested outside former Senator Hillary Clinton’s office building, chaining himself to the door in protest against the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Despite working on legislative issues, though, Adam maintains his distance from mainstream politics: “When I’m involved in campaigns relating to elections, it’s important for me not to vote on election day. It reminds me, ‘Hey, I’m an anarchist!’ I’ve never felt like voting could actually change anything.”

Change, he said, is more likely to come from the exhaustion of natural resources or global climate change. “Capitalism is going down,” he told me confidently, “The question is whether it’s going to take us with it, and whether it’s going to take the biosphere with it.” Sitting inside New York’s Grand Central Station, surrounded by an incongruous opulence of shops selling luxury goods and commuters returning home from working in the financial capital of the world, he elaborated on his political vision: “People need to be growing food, setting up housing through expropriation, creating health care collectives, bike repair workshops. We need things that bring the essentials of living to a community level. I don’t think we need that complex of a society. We need to move beyond the culture of production.” He closed with a comment that seemed particularly fitting, given his ascetic lifestyle: “We just don’t need stuff.”

Freegans and the Politics of Waste

On this December dumpster dive, Adam is not just looking for things to eat. Instead of stashing the tomato in his bag, he raises it up into the air, and launches into a lengthy speech. He denounces the labor exploitation, free trade agreements, and multi-national agribusinesses that brought the tomato here. He then lifts a shrink-wrapped package of chicken legs and announces his opposition to factory farming, railing against birds packed by the thousands into cages and fattened on genetically engineered-diets for mechanized slaughter. Finally, he grabs a banana, emblazoned with a sticker stating that it is “fair-trade.” Adam is unconvinced: he holds it above

his head, points it, and defies those who think that purchasing products labeled “organic” or “fair-trade” is any more ethically defensible than buying the tomato or the chicken. He is, in his words, “waving the banana at capitalism,” unveiling *both* where consumer goods come from *and* where they go.

Adam’s views on society, his political commitments, and his personal practices are undoubtedly extreme. He’s the first to admit that, throughout his life, many of his appeals have fallen on deaf ears. After all, Adam talks incessantly about “capitalism” in an era where the word has virtually disappeared from our popular and political lexicon. More than that: he calls for *alternatives* to capitalism at a time when most of us would agree with economist Hernando de Soto, who wrote that “Capitalism stands alone as the only feasible way to rationally organize a modern economy.”²⁹

Yet, on this night in December, despite a temperature with wind-chill well below twenty degrees Fahrenheit, a gathered crowd of twenty-five gives Adam’s tirade their rapt attention. The assembled individuals are difficult to characterize. While a few display tattoos, piercings, and tight black clothing—the unofficial uniform of 21st century urban youth counter-culture—the rest of the group is more eclectic. Among them are cab drivers, teachers, doctors, secretaries, artists, and computer programmers; they range in age from high-school students to retirees. Most are white, well educated, and come from middle-class backgrounds; two-thirds of them are women. They are joined by a television crew from MTV, a photojournalist from Norway, and a freelance writer from Argentina. They have come to participate in one of the collective dumpster dives called “trash tours” that Adam occasionally led through New York City from 2003 to 2009.

²⁹ (2000:1).

A report on garbage from *The Economist* claims that “there are really only three things you can do with waste: burn it, bury it, or recycle it.”³⁰ Yet if we follow this tomato for a little longer, we see that the afterlives of waste can be more complex. Carried by subway, bicycle, or on foot, this tomato might make its way to a communal apartment, where it will help feed a handful of unemployed left-wing activists. Or, quite possibly, it will find itself at a Brooklyn anarchist community center, to be cooked and served as part of a free meal—composed entirely of scavenged food—for the surrounding low-income community. Other food from this night’s dumpster-diving expedition is taken onto the metro and distributed ad hoc to anyone willing to take it. Far from disappearing, then, this tomato suddenly provides a window into an incipient but poorly understood social phenomenon: “freeganism.”

The word “freegan” was added to dictionaries in 2004,³¹ although my own investigations suggest it was coined in the 1990s. Its etymology provides some hint as to its meaning. “Freegan” is a combination of the words “free” and “vegan,” and the logic of freeganism is parallel to that behind veganism. Vegans oppose animal exploitation by avoiding purchasing animal products, both as a symbolic act of protest and direct attempt to bankrupt animal agriculture. At least in theory, freegans expand the logic of veganism to the entire capitalist economy, protesting overconsumption, environmental degradation, and human mistreatment by refusing to purchase anything at all.

There are innumerable ways to go about this attempted withdrawal from capitalism: a document Adam circulated on the e-mail list for the website of the New-York based group “freegan.info” described no less than thirty-nine different practices that fall under the freegan

³⁰ (McBride 2009:5).

³¹ (Glowka, Melancon, and Wycoff 2004).

banner. A partial inventory includes “guerrilla gardening” in fenced-off city lots, wild food foraging in urban parks, free exchange of unneeded goods through a “gift economy” of “free stores” and “really really free markets,” squatting in abandoned buildings, repairing clothing and furniture rather than purchasing new ones, bicycling and hitchhiking, sharing survival skills within radical communities, developing independent non-corporate media, protesting directly against wasteful companies and stores, voluntary unemployment and full-time activism, “couch-surfing” to get free housing while traveling, drastically reducing personal energy use, and composting. What freegans are best known for, though, is dumpster diving. Also variously known as “scavenging,” “bin raiding,” “trash trolling,” “skipping,” “curb crawling,” “urban foraging,” “trash picking,” “doing the duck,” or “dumpstering,” “dumpster diving” entails recovering, redistributing, and reusing food and other goods that have been discarded.³²

Taken on their own, none of these practices is particularly novel. Nor is an ideology that celebrates non-participation in capitalism. Freegans’ actions and beliefs have clear precursors within utopian back-to-the-land communities, the “New Left” of the 1960s, and the radical wings of the environmental movement. Even the freegan.info website defines freeganism in what could charitably be described as un-original terms:

Freegans are people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources.

Freegans embrace community, generosity, social concern, freedom, cooperation, and sharing in opposition to a society based on materialism, moral apathy, competition, conformity, and greed.

³² In New York City, scavengers rarely encounter dumpsters, and as such, the term “dumpster diving” is a misnomer. Even though many freegans acknowledge this, “dumpster diving” is still the most common term used within freegan.info and I use it throughout this book.

The vagueness of the website is reflective of the unwillingness of individual freegan.info participants to clearly circumscribe the boundaries of their movement. Explained Cindy, a self-described freegan who has been involved in freegan.info for a decade, “You’re either vegetarian or you’re not. But you’re freegan if you decide you’re freegan. It’s not a set of rules.” Freeganism, others told me, is “contested terrain,” a nebulous “moving target.” Outside of the movement, in popular discourse and the media, I’ve even heard “freegans” labeled as “dumpster divers,” “people who eat for free,” and “cheapskates.”

When I interviewed participants in freegan.info, though, they kept circling back to one central theme: the challenge of living ethically in a capitalist system, while simultaneously trying to transform that system as a whole into something ethical itself. Freegans, one told me, are “practicing anti-capitalists.” Another described freeganism as a form of “conscientious objection to capitalism,” based on “non-participation in the economic joke that is the capitalist world.” In truth, no freegan.info participant lives entirely “outside” of capitalism—and, in fact, doing so isn’t really the point. Instead, by emphasizing the need to boycott the entire economic system, rather than just particular companies or products, freegans assert the futility of small-scale environmental reform or minor changes in consumer practices. As Cindy summarized it, freeganism at its heart “is an attack on the mainstream environmental movement for thinking that we can solve environmental problems without attacking capitalism.”

In public, freegans are sometimes reluctant to evoke “capitalism” directly and talk instead about “the system” or “consumer society.” But regardless of the language they use, freegans reject some of the most basic tenets at the heart of capitalism, such as the necessity of endless economic growth, the valuing of commodities primarily in terms of their price, and the distribution of needed goods through the market. For freegans, “waste” is proof *par excellence*

that these central imperatives make capitalism profoundly dysfunctional and immoral. As the freegan.info website asserts:

In the globalized system dominated by a relative handful of corporations, vital resources like food and housing are wasted while the needs of hundreds of millions go unmet. All manner of consumer commodities are produced cheaply, offered for sale at high prices, and often discarded unsold by corporations that dismiss the waste as a cost of doing business. These corporations promote disposable goods over reusable ones, design rapidly obsolete products, and ensure that repair is more expensive than replacement. Enormous volumes of still-usable goods go to landfills that poison the exurban communities pressed into hosting them, with a disproportionate impact on the poor and disenfranchised.³³

Freegans believe they are doing more than just denouncing what is wrong with capitalism, however. They also claim that their movement is an ongoing experiment with alternative ways of providing for themselves and organizing society. As Adam explained during his speech that December night:

The freegan model for revolution is not just that we can preach this and suddenly people will take to the streets with torches and tear everything down. We realize that many people see the system as their very means of survival. So we believe that the only alternative is to build this new society within the shell of the old.

Paradoxically, it is largely through the collective repurposing of waste that freegans are able to put their stated values—“community, generosity, social concern, freedom, cooperation, and sharing”—into practice, even while living in New York City.

³³ <http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-philosophy/>

Freeganism, at least as understood by the core participants in freegan.info, is thus about much more than just reducing personal consumption. Instead, individual lifestyle changes are a stepping-stone to more radical, transformative, and collective action to build alternatives to the capitalist system. As Madeline, one freegan.info activist, put it, “The point isn’t my lifestyle and how pure or impure it is. It’s not about [taking] shorter showers. It’s about making a political point and changing hearts and minds and getting people to take first actions for themselves.”

Freegans’ anti-capitalist politics and fixation on waste would seem like a recipe for complete obscurity. Yet since the group’s founding in 2003, freegan.info has attracted thousands of people from New York and elsewhere to “trash tours”³⁴ through the city, exposing them to waste and teaching them to recover food and other discarded items. The group has connected with hundreds of others through its bike workshop, “wild food foraging” expeditions in city parks, “really really free markets” that distribute surplus goods, sewing skill-shares, films and forums, and dumpster-dived catering at activist events. By its own count, by 2009 freegan.info had featured in 600 media stories, ranging from blog posts written by high school students to Madeline’s extended appearance on Oprah in early 2008. Outside New York, there are or have been self-identified freegan groups in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, Austria, France, Canada, Greece, Poland, and Brazil, as well as a half-dozen U.S. cities from Boston to Sioux Falls, South Dakota and Decatur, Georgia.

³⁴ This is an extremely rough estimate. In my time with the group, the organization has averaged two trash tours a month, with approximately twenty participants, at least half of which are new on a given night, which suggests at least 2500 attendees.

Ex-Commodities and the Fetishism of Waste

By examining freegan.info in depth, this book explores one of the most visible and vocal manifestations of a phenomenon that has received growing academic attention³⁵ and inspired significant popular interest.³⁶ In my own quest to understand freeganism, though, I've had to go beyond freeganism itself to examine changes in contemporary activism, consumer culture, and—above all—the production, representation, and politics of waste under American capitalism.³⁷ In trying to make sense of how freegans' politics of waste are both possible and surprisingly compelling, I rely on two concepts: the “ex-commodity” and the “fetish of waste.” The terms are my own, but the ideas came from time spent with the freegans themselves.

In the first line of his magnum opus, *Capital*, Karl Marx classically observed that “The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of ‘commodities.’”³⁸ Commodities make up the material abundance that greets us whenever we enter a supermarket or shopping mall. At least as most of us understand it, then, “waste” is the precise opposite of the “commodity.” Waste is “the rejected and worthless stuff that needs to be distanced from the societies that produced it.”³⁹ “Waste” appears to lack

³⁵ Published articles include (Barnard 2011; Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013; Corman 2011; Coyne 2009; Edwards and Mercer 2007, 2012; Gross 2009; Lindeman 2012; More 2011; Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee 2013; Thomas 2010), in addition to several unpublished theses and dissertations (Darrell 2009; Donovan 2012; Dougherty 2013; Ernst 2009; Mourad 2012; Pandeli 2011).

³⁶ A handful of recent references to freeganism in general-interest books can be found in (Bloom 2010; Botha 2004; Erway 2011; Ferrell 2006; Lee 2010; Rufus and Lawson 2009; Shteir 2012; Singer and Mason 2006; Stuart 2009; Sundeen 2012).

³⁷ I am deeply indebted to Gille's (2010) framework of “waste regimes” for this tripartite analytical distinction of waste in terms of its production, representation, and politicization. By and large, the first part of this book deals with the production of waste, the second with its representation, and the third with its politicization.

³⁸ (1976:125).

³⁹ (Evans et al. 2012:6–7)

what Marx would call “use value”—the capacity to “satisf[y] human needs of whatever kind”⁴⁰—and “exchange value”—the ability to be sold on the market.

But if what we call “waste” is really so worthless, so valueless, so degraded and polluted, how is it possible for freegans to recover and use it? The answer, freegans like Adam argue, is that much of what gets labeled as “waste” under capitalism isn’t waste at all. This still-useable portion of our waste stream is what I am calling “ex-commodities.” Ex-commodities are material objects with the same capacity to satisfy human wants and needs as commodities, but which, for whatever reason, cannot be profitably sold.⁴¹ That is to say, they have “use value” but lack sufficient “exchange value.” Because capitalist enterprises are ultimately interested only in “exchange value”—that is to say, profit—such objects are simply discarded. As Adam explained:

We live in an economic system where sellers only value land and commodities relative to their capacity to generate profit. Consumers are constantly being bombarded with advertising telling them to discard and replace the goods they already have because this increases sales. This practice of affluent societies produces an amount of waste so enormous that many people can be fed and supported simply on its trash.

The wealth of capitalist societies is not to be found only on the supermarket shelves, but also in its dumpsters. It is this “immense accumulation of unused, abandoned, and recycled [ex]commodities”⁴² that makes freegans’ partial withdrawal from the mainstream economy possible. And, paradoxically—some would say, contradictorily—it is thanks to the use value in the ex-commodities of capitalism that freegans are able to experiment with alternatives to it.

⁴⁰ (1976:125).

⁴¹ The term “ex-commodity” is also used by Appadurai (1986:16). Giles (2013:15), drawing on Bataille (1949) and Agamben (1998), introduces the similar idea of “abject capital”: commercial waste which is still useable but which is more profitable to throw away than to sell.

⁴² (Henderson 2004:490).

The very existence of ex-commodities, as freegans are quick to point out, raises some profound questions. Indeed, some of the core shibboleths of mainstream economics seem to collapse under the weight of the 500 billion pounds of municipal waste—at least some of which consists of still useable ex-commodities—produced in the United States each year.⁴³ Supply often *does not* equal demand. Free markets frequently *do not* lead to an efficient distribution of goods. And even as the economies of the Western world present consumers with an unparalleled cornucopia of different commodities, they simultaneously make those commodities more expensive by artificially creating scarcity through ex-commodification. Nowhere, freegans will tell you, is this more evident than with respect to food.

Freegans like Adam are convinced that waste in the form of ex-commodities holds the key to convincing large numbers of people to resist the social and ecological depredations of capitalism. As Adam postulated in one essay:

If consumers became aware of this massive waste, this could pose a serious problem for retailers operating under this model. Some [consumers] might choose to recover discarded goods rather than purchasing the very same goods in the store. On a large enough scale, this could substantially cut into profits.⁴⁴

And yet, despite the media attention and increased visibility freeganism has garnered in recent years, it is obvious that the vast majority of people *don't* make any attempt to recover capitalism's "massive waste."

⁴³ This figure is drawn from (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2013). Note that their classification of waste in terms of materials (paper, plastic, etc.) does not allow for any assessment of what proportion of waste is really un-usable and what proportion consists of intact ex-commodities.

⁴⁴ <http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-philosophy/freeganism-waste-and-the-ideology-of-the-product/>

The question—if capitalism is so bad, why don't more people revolt against it?—has of course vexed radicals and revolutionaries since long before freeganism entered the scene. One of many reasons for our apparent complacency, some have postulated, is that most people are unaware of the abuses that capitalist production visits on ourselves and on the planet.⁴⁵ We see the vast array of commodities presented to us by capitalism in terms of their useful physical properties—their ability to nourish, clothe, or amuse us—but are mystified when it comes to the enormous social and environmental costs of their production. Marx called this the “fetish of the commodity,” whereby the “social relation[s] between men themselves” that went into creating any material good were obfuscated and instead mistaken as “the fantastic form of a relation between things.”⁴⁶ The fetish makes capitalism seem like the natural way of things—both in the narrow sense of commodities themselves, and the natural way of organizing a society.⁴⁷ It was this version of the commodity fetish Adam claimed to be seeing past when, on one trash tour, he announced: “We view the commodities being marketed to us and see them for what they are—misery and suffering with a clean coat of paint.”⁴⁸

Yet freegans' dumpster dives suggest that the classical notion of the fetish is incomplete, because it refers only to the processes of production and ignores what happens to goods once they leave the factory. By exposing ex-commodities, freegans are trying to dispel another

⁴⁵ A more thorough discussion of the various mechanisms by which people consent to capitalism can be found in Przeworski (1985) and Burawoy (1979).

⁴⁶ (1976:165).

⁴⁷ See Gunderson (2014) for an excellent discussion of different views of the commodity fetish.

⁴⁸ As he elaborates in one essay, “The seemingly harmless everyday products that we buy are produced through human exploitation, environmental abuse, and animal torture; sweatshop labor, factory farming, animal testing, industrial pollution, deforestation, oil spills, forced displacement of indigenous communities, forced child labor, murder of union organizers, advertisements that objectify women and promote destructive and unrealistic body image ideals, use of toxic pesticides, destruction of wildlife, funding wars and dictatorships, and other atrocities. When we buy these products, we pay for these practices.”

fetish—the fetish of waste. We might think of the fetish of waste as having two sides to it. First, when we see commodities on offer in a store, we *don't* see the nearly identical ex-commodities that were produced alongside them and then wasted, even though the costs of this wastage are factored into the price of the commodities we buy. Second, if we *did* see ex-commodities, we wouldn't recognize them for what they really are—still useful objects—but would instead see them as useless waste.

As I examine throughout this book, the blindfold of the fetish is woven by a range of social and political processes. Ex-commodities are locked away in dumpsters, tucked into back-alleys, and trucked to far-off landfills. Yet they can also hide in plain sight because popular culture tells us that anything in the trash bin must be dirty and worthless, and that the only people who would rummage for these items are starving and desperate. Even when we do recognize “waste” for what it really is, we blame consumer ignorance or government intervention for its existence—shielding capitalism itself from blame.

These two concepts are the core of freegans' political action. Freegan.info's events focus on bringing ex-commodities, and the use value contained within them, out into the open for all to see. Freegans demonstrate that ex-commodities are still useful by wearing discarded clothes, riding abandoned bikes, and, above all, eating wasted food. They show that waste is not an indelible and inherent material property of things, but a label imposed on those things by society.⁴⁹ As Adam reflected in one essay:

We are led to believe that the goods presented to us in stores are safe, effective, desirable, and worth the money we are spending on them. We have spent lifetimes hearing adages

⁴⁹ As Gille (2008:18) observes, “materials are not ‘born’ to be waste: they are transformed into waste by identifiable material and social processes.”

such as ‘There’s no such thing as a free lunch’, designed to convince us that only hard work at joyless jobs can guarantee our survival. We are left with the impression that anything we aren’t required to pay for can’t possibly be worth having. We therefore assume that discarded goods must be unsafe, ineffective, unusable, or otherwise undesirable. Stripping away the marketing attached to goods, it becomes apparent that neither assumption is true: the goods sold to us aren’t necessarily good for us, and the ones discarded aren’t necessarily bad.⁵⁰

Seeing through the fetish of waste through dumpster diving, then, can lead to as profound a shift in understandings as uncovering the classic fetish of the commodity. More importantly, it raises the possibility of alternative social arrangements, ones in which our society would recover the wasted wealth it currently squanders.

The rest of this book is devoted to using these two concepts—the “ex-commodity” and the “fetish of waste”—to explore the politics of freeganism, while simultaneously trying to evaluate the claims about capitalism these concepts embody. How much of what we currently call “waste” consists of useful ex-commodities that activists can recover? Why is food “ex-commodified” in such particularly execrable quantities? How did the participants in freegan.info come to see past the fetishism of waste and decide that recovering waste was an efficacious form of political action? Why has freegans’ critique of capitalism resonated while so many other contemporary denunciations of capitalism have failed to gain any audience at all? What are the possibilities and limits of trying to build a new society out of capitalism’s wasted ex-commodities? And what happens when capitalist institutions discover that people are openly

⁵⁰ <http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-philosophy/freeganism-waste-and-the-ideology-of-the-product/>

living off the system's supposedly-hidden detritus? Answering these questions requires diving into the social world of freeganism and even further into the hidden histories of waste in American society.

I: UNEARTHING THE EX-COMMODITY: THE ORIGINS OF FREEGANISM

1. The New Anarchists and the Wastes of Capitalism

When Adam finished his “waving the banana” speech, he ceded his impromptu sidewalk-podium to another core member of the freegan.info group, Jason. Wearing blue jeans, a tight, zip-up black hoodie, and thick-rimmed glasses, Jason’s muscular frame and height made him stand out among the assembled trash-tour participants. His role this night was to tell the attendees on this trash tour about a series of upcoming events organized by freegan.info. Nonetheless, he supplemented this information with a personal comment to the crowd, many of whom were now laden with bags of dumpstered food:

When we go home, for the next week or for however long and we eat this food, we can feel better knowing that our money didn’t just go right back to these companies to make things get worse and worse. That’s what freeganism is all about. It’s about us figuring out ways that we don’t have to be part of this system, this system that we completely disagree with. If we really want to get honest, we know that we *hate* the system. It’s just that we can’t do anything about it—but we can! Right here, right now, we can feed ourselves and not give a dime to anyone.

I pulled Jason aside afterward and asked him what “the system” he so detested actually was. He started by mentioning consumerism and capitalism, but then he went on, adding “industrialization,” “urbanization,” “agriculture,” and “civilization” to the list of things to which, he, as a freegan, was opposed.

As with most participants in the group, Jason’s path to freeganism was a long one. Jason’s first sorties into political action were of a mainstream flavor: Jason says he identified as a

“progressive democrat” throughout college, during which he worked for a campus environmental group. When he graduated in 2005, he moved to New York to pursue his interest in film. At the time, he admits:

I got really concerned about my life and making money—being financially independent and pursuing my dreams. It was kind of ‘American Dream’ kind of ideas. I spent so much time keeping track of people and how much money they’re making. Is their life better than mine? Are they living better than I am?

I first interviewed Jason in early 2009, a few months after he had begun attending freegan.info meetings. We talked inside his apartment in Brooklyn, a locale that offered few hints of Jason’s hardline politics. Instead, a pile of Coors Light cans, guitars and amplifiers, and a pile of GRE study-guides suggested that Jason and his two non-freegan roommates were just three among the thousands of young professionals trying to make it in the city.

Already, though, Jason’s lifestyle, expectations for the future, and activist involvements were shifting in tandem. Reflecting on his adoption of freegan practices, he admitted:

I don’t buy any of the stuff I used to buy. I make half of what I used to. I don’t go to cool parties. I’ve definitely changed my consciousness in terms of what my life is about and where I’m headed. I don’t envision myself doing any of the things I used to think I would. I actually see myself trying to earn *less* money.

Jason’s fundamental shift in orientation started, he said, when he began doing research into the roots of environmental destruction, which led him to the self-described “anti-civilization” author Derek Jensen. His readings made him realize, he said, that “my life was about living in this comfortable cushion of exploitation, and I’m not doing anything about it,” adding after a pause, “I just started hating everything.” He admitted that, at that point, he was “anti-this and anti-that”

but hadn't found a way to "put it all together and think about what was a rational way to respond to this aside from being anti- a lot of things." Jason had a radical ideology, but no way to put that ideology into practice.

The practices he needed came to him when he attended a freegan.info trash tour and discovered the broader political praxis of which dumpster diving was one part. Freeganism appealed to him not just because it was ideologically radical, but because it tied that radicalism to immediate transformations of his place in the world:

I realized that, if you go out, and you look, you can find people, you can find things, you can find networks and groups of people that will be there to help you. You can get help from fellow people...It's not just, 'Go to work, go to the bank, go to the store, and go home, and then go to the bar.' Every place you go and every interaction you have doesn't have to be based on money. The world is just free. There's stuff out there for free, there are people you don't have to spend money to be with, there's fun out there that you don't have to spend money to have. It just feels really good.

Unlike the movements Jason had been involved in previously, the freegans weren't making symbolic appeals to policymakers or exhorting people to vote in the hopes of future change. Instead, at least as Jason saw it, their politics entailed showing people how to create communities and lifestyles without capitalism, without consumerism, without environmental destruction—now. Concluding his reflection, Jason added, "If you take it far enough, it's a critique of everything. It's totally revolutionary."

And Jason *did* take it further. I caught up with him in the winter in 2012. He told me that his work in the freegan.info bike workshop led him to the In Our Hearts collective, an explicitly

anarchist group.¹ From there, he moved into Surrealestate, a warehouse in Brooklyn that had been converted by participants in freegan.info into a communal living space for nearly fifty activists and artists. Surrealestate, he said, was akin to surrounding himself with the “freegan dream,” a place where there was “anarchism, green anarchism, red anarchism, purple anarchism, all morphing together... There was just a lot of general ferment going on.”

Jason had integrated himself into a radical community that was attempting to create an alternative to capitalism in the heart of New York City. Although he continued to engage in more conventional political activities, such as attending demonstrations against the Free Trade Area of the Americas, the essence of his activism at this point was to “transform every aspect of my life at every level, so I can totally eliminate money, be outside of the system, [and] create something else.” What made this form of political practice possible, ironically, was the waste of capitalism itself: “Trash cans and alleyways...they’re mysterious and off limits. But with freeganism, you’re opening all these doors, and suddenly, there’s all this stuff.”

The Rise of Direct Action

Where did freeganism come from? Although freeganism began to gain significant attention rather abruptly in the late 2000s, like all social movements, it was far from an “immaculate conception.”² The lineaments of freeganism can easily be traced to that heyday of American activism—the 1960s—and some of the alternative conceptions of political action birthed in that decade. The most iconic political actions of the 1960s—such as the Civil Rights Movement’s march on Washington, mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War, or even civil

¹ The name “In Our Hearts” comes from the Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti, who averred, “We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie may blast and ruin their own world before they leave the stage of history. But we carry a new world in our hearts” (qtd. in Marshall 2008:636).

² (Taylor 1989).

disobedience to de-segregate lunch counters or bus stations—shared a common underlying understanding of what “politics” was all about. Each used symbolic action to pressure external groups, whether voters or policy-making elites, to address social problems through state action.³ Other sub-currents of the New Left of the 1960s, however, became disillusioned with the formal democratic process and began searching for more immediate ways to change society. Offshoots of the civil rights, anti-war, and student movements began eschewing the *indirect* influence of marches, demonstrations, and petitions in favor of “prefigurative politics”—a focus on *directly* building an alternative society from the ground up in the here-and-now.⁴

Some of these experiments in political action had fairly obvious similarities to freeganism. In October 1966, a group calling themselves “the Diggers” (after a 17th century English peasant movement dedicated to abolishing private property) began distributing free food to the hippies and homeless congregating in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. Prophesizing oncoming ecological doom, the Diggers called for a rapid transition away from industrialism and capitalism.⁵ Not content only to preach, however, they sought to construct the new, post-capitalist society they saw as necessary, creating “free stores” to distribute donated, surplus, or stolen goods and offering free medical care and housing. For the Diggers, “revolution” was not an event to happen in the distant future, nor was the goal of a revolution to seize the state and use it to impose top-down change on society. Instead, revolution would come

³ Tilly (2008) provides a thorough discussion of this modern, state-centered “repertoire” of collective action.

⁴ Even though I juxtapose anarchists’ prefigurative emphasis against the more classic focus on seizing power among socialist revolutionaries, even “old left” movements have had prefigurative dimensions. For example, Gramsci’s (1971) “war of position” emphasizes the need to build independent sources of power prior to direct confrontation with the state or capital. Even earlier, the Knights of Labor, the main US labor union in the 1880s, sought to create a set of alternative institutions that prefigured an alternative to capitalism (Voss 1993:83).

⁵ (Belasco 2007:18).

from the bottom-up, through changes to everyday practices. As one Digger pamphlet stated, “First free the space, goods, and services. Let the theories of economics follow social facts.”⁶

This prefigurative approach to politics can be seen in other splinters of the New Left. In Berkeley, activists seized an abandoned parking lot and turned it into a “People’s Park,” which they claimed would become a “model of a peaceful, cooperative society.”⁷ Although better known for their advocacy of armed revolution, the Black Panther Party also had a prefigurative side, creating a series of “survival programs” to provide food, education, and health care to impoverished black communities.⁸ Thousands of other activists gave up on changing mainstream society entirely and moved to rural communes intended to be oases of egalitarianism and sustainability.⁹ Obviously, many of the political experiments created in the late 1960s under the auspices of prefigurative politics dissolved in the face of repression and internal dysfunction. Nonetheless, this approach to bringing about social change lived on through the 1970s and 1980s among radical feminists, anti-nuclear activists, and participants in the “do-it-yourself” punk scene.¹⁰

There is some evidence to suggest, however, that the practices of prefigurative politics have been growing in prominence in the last two decades.¹¹ The explanation for this proliferation lies in the particular challenges faced by anyone seeking to profoundly change society in the

⁶ (qtd. in Belasco 2007:20).

⁷ (Belasco 2007:21; see also Compost 2009; Mitchell 1995).

⁸ (Bloom and Martin 2013).

⁹ (Berger 1981; Case and Taylor 1979; Jacob 1997; Kanter 1973).

¹⁰ (see Epstein 1991; Holtzman, Hughes, and Van Meter 2007; Moore and Roberts 2009).

¹¹ Both Graeber (2004) and St John (2008) make this claim, but neither has systematic or quantitative data to buttress the assertion. Williams and Lee (2008:57) find a 43% increase in the number of anarchist organizations worldwide between 1997 and 2005, albeit with data they themselves acknowledge to be problematic. Nonetheless, the important role of prefiguration in some of the most visible social movements of the last decade—especially the anti-globalization and Occupy movements—suggests there is truth to the notion.

present moment. In the 1960s, an anti-capitalist could credibly argue that it was possible to transform the U.S. into a non-capitalist society by noting that alternatives—however flawed—already existed, in the form of the Soviet Union and its satellites. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, however, both socialism and social democracy were deeply discredited. Indeed, one of the central tenets of politics today is encapsulated by the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s famous statement, “There is no alternative.” That is to say: whatever our moral compunctions about capitalism, it’s all there is. Even scholars *critical* of capitalism admit that “there do not appear to be any economic, political, or ideational alternatives [to capitalism] in sight.”¹² Adam articulated the challenge facing today’s anti-capitalists starkly:

People see the global capitalist economy as intrinsic to their society. And as long as people see that, they can’t challenge it, because bringing that down seems nihilistic and insane. It’s like telling someone you can breathe without oxygen. It’s just instantly dismissed—that’s the response we get when we tell people they can live without capitalism.

In short, as Adam has realized, today anti-capitalist activists must do much more than just demand an end to capitalism; they must show people a viable alternative to it. And they must do so even while the state—the typical agent of change that social movements seek to mobilize—has come to seem increasingly impotent in the face of the global market.¹³ Some element of “prefigurative politics” is thus virtually obligatory for any contemporary radical movement.

¹² (Centeno and Cohen 2012:312).

¹³ This argument is elaborated by Voss and Williams (2012).

If the fall of the Berlin Wall seemed to forever crush the hopes of socialist revolutionaries, another group of anti-capitalists—anarchists—saw it as an opportunity.¹⁴ Although the label “anarchism” evokes a host of negative associations with “violence” or “chaos,” most contemporary anarchists understand themselves as seeking to achieve revolutionary social change through building a “new society within the shell of the old”¹⁵ rather than through seizing state power.¹⁶ Anarchists have long argued that politics need to be prefigurative: even before the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia, for example, anarchists had warned against a communist political strategy which “did not explicitly deploy the principles on which a future society would be based.”¹⁷

Modern-day anarchists focus on building communities on the margins of capitalist society, within which they can implement their values of “autonomy, voluntary association, self-organization, mutual aid, [and] direct democracy”¹⁸ and therefore “prefigure” a post-capitalist utopia. They are, in their own eyes, engaged in what anthropologist David Graeber describes as “direct action,” “a form of action in which means and ends become effectively indistinguishable; a way of actively engaging with the world to bring about change, in which the form of the action...is itself a model for the change one wishes to bring about.”¹⁹ After decades of being

¹⁴ (see Marshall 2008; Olson 2009; Williams and Lee 2012).

¹⁵ (Graeber 2004:7).

¹⁶ This definition is consistent with research on anarchist movements that show that most anarchists define themselves in terms of their tactics and practices, rather than abstract ideologies (Graeber 2009; Juris 2008; Katsiaficas 2006). Anarchists’ disagreements with other socialist movements have generally focused on tactics, rather than aims or ends (Williams and Lee 2008).

¹⁷ (Ince 2012:1652).

¹⁸ (Graeber 2004:2).

¹⁹ (2009:210). Some authors collapse “direct action” and “civil disobedience” (Epstein 1991; Heynen 2010; Juris 2008), but I see the two as fundamentally different. “Civil disobedience” entails the use law-breaking to pressure external entities to rectify some unjust situation, such as segregation. “Direct action,” while possibly illegal, makes no such demands on elites,

overshadowed by various strains of state-centered socialism, the growing adoption of anarchist “direct action” became visible in the dramatic series of protests at the summits of international organizations, such as the World Trade Organization, G-8, or International Monetary Fund that swept the globe in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Those protests are best remembered for their carnival-like character—such as the “medieval bloc” in Quebec hurling stuffed animals during a demonstration—or for the property-destruction instigated by the “Black Bloc”—such as at the WTO protests in Seattle, 1999. These spectacles have fed widespread derision of the anti-globalization movement (AGM).²⁰ Many sociologists interpreted the protests as simply the traditional approach to politics—symbolic protests making appeals to policymakers—taken to a new, global scale.²¹ Accounts from inside the movement, however, suggest these observers largely missed the point. First, at least for some participants, the protests were not symbolic and indirect attempts to dissuade policymakers from signing on to free trade agreements. They were, instead, *direct* interventions intended to physically prevent them from doing so by shutting down the meetings. Secondly, movement participants believed that the way they organized the protests—“horizontal coordination among autonomous groups, grassroots participation, consensus decision-making, and the free and open exchange of information”²²—modeled a better mode of global governance.²³ The oft-repeated

policymakers, or the general public. As Graeber (2009:203) explains, “The direct actionist does not just refuse to pay taxes to support a militarized school system, she combines with others to try to create a new school system that operates on different principles.”

²⁰ British Prime Minister Tony Blair, for example, derided the protests as an “anarchist traveling circus” (qtd. in St John 2008:171), while New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman quipped that they were a “Noah’s ark of flat-earth advocates, protectionist trade unions, and yuppies looking for their 1960’s fix” (Friedman 1999).

²¹ (Della Porta 2007; Tarrow 2005; Tilly 2008).

²² (Juris 2008:14).

chant of the protesters—“This is what democracy looks like!”—was more than just rhetoric: many AGM activists believed that the movement was developing a genuine alternative to a formal democratic system that they perceived as powerless, corporate-controlled, and unresponsive.

Of course, if small direct-democratic assemblies and affinity groups don’t seem like a realistic way to govern a complex high-speed global economy, that’s partly the point. In contrast to more traditional communists, who promised a hyper-productive post-capitalist techno-utopia, contemporary anti-capitalists are “prefiguring” a simpler and slower world.²⁴ Graffiti left behind the AGM mobilizations, for example, declared that “growth is madness.”²⁵ One of the most important rallying cries of the movement was borrowed from the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico: “Ya Basta!” or “enough already.”²⁶ The “program” of the AGM might be summarized in a single word: less. Activists sought restraint of markets, temperance of excess, conservation of resources, preservation of the commons, and frugality in individual living.²⁷

I discuss the AGM at length because it helps us embed freegans’ politics in a broader field of movements and discourses circulating on the fringe. More than that, though, a full understanding of “prefigurative politics” is essential to see why what freegans do—whether building bikes or operating meetings through consensus—is “political” at all. The collapse of

²³ See (Evans 2008:277). For discussions of democratic practice and organization in the alter-globalization movement, see (Graeber 2009; Langman 2005; Maeckelbergh 2011; Routledge, Nativel, and Cumbers 2006).

²⁴ Some participants in these movements might nevertheless not recognize themselves as being “anti-capitalist,” owing to the label’s pejorative connotation. Yet it is impossible to reject growth and say “no more” without rejecting capitalism, since growth is the capitalist system’s most basic driving force.

²⁵ (Yates 2011:547).

²⁶ (J. Yates 2011:541).

²⁷ Yates (2011:551). See also Vail (2010)

“means” and “ends” in anarchist politics is rarely appreciated by outsiders commenting on movements like the AGM or Occupy Wall Street (OWS). Anarchists’ “veritable obsession with process”²⁸ has frustrated those who believe movements must make clear demands and bring those demands to policymakers using established tactics like marches, petitions, and rallies. But while some saw the endless general assemblies that characterized the AGM and OWS as a barrier to “true” political action, for anarchists creating decentralized, diverse, and democratic networks is a political end in itself.²⁹ In response to complaints that the summit protesters lacked any clear ideology, for example, Graeber—himself a participant, as well as an anthropologist—counters that for activists, “the democratic practice they’ve developed *is* their ideology.”³⁰

Commentators and academics, of course, may disagree: they may insist that “political” movements must have a clearly articulated program and tie action in the streets to action at the ballot box.³¹ My goal is not to make an argument about whether prefigurative politics are effective, only to highlight how they widen the scope of what counts as “political” in the first place. Under the banner of prefigurative politics, virtually any action can become politicized. Explained one freegan, “There is this notion that we need an alternative way of life, and it’s very strong right now. As a result, even riding a bicycle or going to the farmer’s market has become a kind of radical statement.” Whether or not we see riding a bike as an efficacious challenge to capitalism, understanding why some activists might think so is crucial to understanding where freeganism comes from.

²⁸ (Maeckelbergh 2011:2; see also Glass 2010).

²⁹ (Routledge et al. 2006:840).

³⁰ (2009:11).

³¹ Heath and Potter (2004:65) describes contemporary anti-capitalist politics as “a set of dramatic gestures that are devoid of any progressive political or economic consequences and that detract from the urgent task of building a more just society.” Sociologist Erik Olin Wright (2010:Ch.10) offers a more measured critique of what he calls “interstitial transformation.”

Waste: A Prefigurative Goldmine

Discussions of “prefigurative politics” within anarchist movements often center on organizational structure and democratic process. Yet the recovery of “waste” has also played a crucial role in anarchist-inspired experiments in reorganizing social and economic life. To understand how this came to be the case, we have to follow the story of the AGM after it largely receded from public view. By the early 2000s, many activists were dissatisfied with short-lived “summit-hopping” protests. They were convinced that their next step was to take the principles of freedom, democracy, and autonomy they experienced in pulling together the demonstrations and use them to create a more enduring social and economic infrastructure.³² This did not, however, entail moving to the countryside, as the communards of the 1960s did. Instead, this political strategy centered on an “engaged withdrawal,”³³ in which anti-capitalists would construct the outlines of a utopian society in sight of capitalist dystopia.

Yet a raft of problems immediately confronts any activist in a capitalist society attempting to create physical spaces, communities, or everyday routines that do not rely on the market. Writing of the challenges anarchists face in finding spaces and social arenas in which they can engage in prefigurative politics, Graeber laments, “Basically, the *only* areas that are off-limits to...regulation backed by force are communicative ones: speech, discussion in meetings, exchanges on the Internet, etc. As soon as one enters the world of material objects, regulations abound.”³⁴ Graeber’s argument helps explain why anarchists have focused so heavily on democratic process and on “do-it-yourself” cultural production of music and literature: because

³² Juris (2008).

³³ (Graeber 2004:60).

³⁴ (2009:284).

neither requires buying anything.³⁵ But how can someone have time to engage in time-consuming prefigurative politics if he or she has to work constantly to feed, clothe, and house him or her self? How can social movements without ready access to cash get resources with which to build alternative institutions if nearly everything they need must be purchased?

At least in some cases, “waste” has served as the answer to both these questions. By the very nature of having been discarded, waste is something in which the previous owner has disavowed any direct interest. Compared to the arenas of “production” and “consumption,” the circulation and processing of waste is a relatively unregulated realm of the economy.³⁶ The fetishism of waste—which I’ll discuss later—hides this waste stream from much of the public, but it also means that waste often falls outside the authorities’ prying gaze. Little surprise, then, that anarchists have turned recovering ex-commodities into a badge of pride and centerpiece of prefigurative politics.

Concrete examples of the politicized use of waste abound in Carlsson’s account of “now-topians”: people who are seeking to create new utopian communities within capitalism’s urban core. As Carlsson documents, participation in projects like designing open-source software, community gardening, or maintaining bicycle cooperatives requires enormous amounts of unpaid work. Waste recovery becomes one way for these activists to free up time for these projects by reducing their reliance on wage labor. More than that, though, many of these projects involve working with waste directly. Tinkerers who use abandoned vegetable oil as fuel are emblematic of this approach:

³⁵ (see Benkler 2013; Holtzman et al. 2007).

³⁶

A politically informed embrace of working with waste underscores many initiatives...A prominent piece of the capitalist economy is its ability to hide the mountain of waste it creates, but biofuels developers have embraced the waste stream as a rich resource of feed-stocks from which to make fuel.³⁷

Driven by an ethic of “us[ing] edges and valu[ing] the marginal,”³⁸ gardeners planting in abandoned city lots and bike mechanics working with discarded parts also offer a critique capitalist excess through prefiguring an alternative society in which “waste” is reclaimed and reused.

In this context, the “detritus of modern life”³⁹ is enough to meet a host of different community needs, albeit insofar as “needs” are defined to exclude excess consumption and resources are shared equitably. Indeed, contemporary anarchists have radically re-envisioned what a post-capitalist society should look like. In contrast with Marx and his followers’ preoccupation with how to organize socialism to produce *more* than capitalism—in part, many thought, by eliminating waste⁴⁰—many contemporary anti-capitalists look at ex-commodities and wonder, “How much is enough? How hard should we work? What do we need? Want?”⁴¹ The alternative to capitalism is not a more productive or more meticulously planned economy, but a society in which resources are conserved, consumption is more frugal, and goods are distributed through democratic rather than market processes.⁴²

³⁷ (2008:181).

³⁸ (Carlsson 2008:59).

³⁹ (Carlsson 2008:4).

⁴⁰ See Wright (2010) and Przeworski (1985) for theoretical discussions of the greater potential productivity and efficiency of socialism; see Gille (2008) for a discussion of how socialists in Hungary used waste reduction to attempt to increase production.

⁴¹ (Carlsson 2008:72).

⁴² (Vail 2010).

Numerous authors have pointed out how decentralized anarchist politics have been facilitated by the internet, which famously allowed AGM activists to chase multinational corporations and international financial institutions around the globe.⁴³ Less attention has been given to how information technology has also been used to tap into surplus resources in various guises. Websites like couchsurfing.org, hitch-wiki, and free-cycle give users access to unused couches and floors, seats in cars, and household goods, respectively; they are frequently used and maintained by self-described anarchists. Although each now has a capitalist analog—AirBnB, Uber, and eBay, for example—they started with the profoundly *non*-capitalist idea of circulating use value without any monetary exchange taking place.

A more explicitly political tactic with increasing prominence among anarchists has been the creation of “infoshops”: community centers in which people can learn about radical ideas, plan political actions, and share practical skills. A popular inventory put out by the Slingshot Activism Collective in Berkeley, California lists several hundred infoshop-style spaces in the U.S. alone, and in one survey, infoshops and community spaces were among the most common anarchist organizations.⁴⁴ Infoshops, which usually operate on a shoestring budget, often use waste to support themselves and their volunteers:

It is not uncommon for anarchist infoshops to be almost fully outfitted with goods found in dumpsters. Many infoshops provide free tables of useful goods that have been dumpstered, cleaned up and, where necessary, repaired as a means to get useable items to people who would not otherwise be able to afford them.⁴⁵

⁴³ (Juris 2008; Langman 2005)

⁴⁴ (Williams and Lee 2008:51).

⁴⁵ (Shantz 2005:12).

As one British infoshop activist explained: “We push people to imagine and build these new, these alternatives to what the state and capital offers. But in the shell of the old; in the shell of what already exists...Really, it’s the relationship that people have with their local resources...that matters.”⁴⁶ In many cases, these “local resources” are waste, in various guises.

A final example of the role of waste in anarchist politics can be seen in movements to “squat” abandoned buildings. In the 1980s, de-regulation of housing markets in the U.S. and Western Europe allowed landowners to artificially raise prices by leaving apartments empty, despite thousands of people needing a place to live.⁴⁷ Under the banner of “autonomism,” youthful activists influenced by anarchism began to directly seize housing from this stock of “wasted” space. By 1981, no less than 10,000 houses had been “squatted” in Amsterdam and, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, activists in that city occupied an entire dilapidated block in East Berlin.⁴⁸ Although never reaching the same heights as in Europe, the squatter’s movement in New York by 1992 included between 500 and 700 people living rent-free in the Lower East Side of Manhattan.⁴⁹ Accounts describe how squatters in these spaces spent their time creating “People’s Kitchens,” radical libraries, and pirate radio stations,⁵⁰ a plethora of prefigurative projects made possible because capitalism was wasting a host of still-habitable houses that activists could recover.

⁴⁶ (Ince 2012:1661).

⁴⁷ (Smith 1996).

⁴⁸ (Katsiaficas 2006:112, 168).

⁴⁹ (Smith 1996:216).

⁵⁰ (Katsiaficas 2006:112).

Many squats across Europe and the U.S. were closed in the late '80s and early '90s in a wave of state repression.⁵¹ Nevertheless, recovering ex-commodified spaces remains an anarchist ideal, one I heard discussed frequently within freegan.info. I first met Sasha, a white male freegan in his late twenties with shaggy light-brown hair and a broad smile, in the summer of 2008, after he had returned from a four month "squat tour" of occupied houses and community spaces in Spain and Latin America. Sasha shared some of the experiences from what he jokingly called "anarcho-tourism" at two open forums, organized by freegan.info and held in an art gallery in Manhattan and a community center in Brooklyn.

Squatting, Sasha told us, is an "active participation in a non-stop critique of the city itself and its capitalist structure. It is constant protest; the act itself is an act of resistance." Sasha debated with more skeptical members of the crowd—many of whom weren't familiar with prefigurative politics—over whether squatting was "political" or simply an instance of not-so-petty theft. In response to one challenge, he countered:

Squatting...is about moving into houses that already exist, moving into spaces that have been abandoned and have been wasted. It's anti-capitalist in a big sense. Whereas capitalism represents a kind of underlying money exchange, where everything has its value that represents it in a global market, squatting basically says, 'Okay, because I can't have this, I'm going to take it anyway.'

As his answer suggests, the politics of squatting comes from the way it uses direct action to deny the rights of owners to "waste"—or, I might say, "ex-commodify"—needed and useful things. Waste figures into squatting in other ways, too: unable to access municipal services, the squatters

⁵¹ In the "Battle of Waterlooplein," for example, more than 500 police used water cannons and tanks as bulldozers to evict squatters in Amsterdam (Smith 1996:169).

Sasha met recycled water from the kitchen sink to flush toilets and scavenged materials left at construction sites to make repairs.

The forum also pointed to some of the limitations and contradictions of an anarchist prefigurative politics dependent upon waste. As Esther, Sasha's traveling companion, admitted, despite squatters' anti-capitalist ideals, "One of the big realities is money. All urban squats that I experienced, you could not completely drop out of the system. There were things that you could not get in other ways. So they were selling things..."

Sasha then jumped in, adding, "It's way too idealistic to just expect that you will never need money. A lot of the times, people will do stuff to get money. They'll busk, perform on the street. Other stuff like that."

Esther summarized the relationships between squats and outside society in terms of an ongoing tension between "dropping-out" and remaining relevant and engaged: "The ideal is to be self-sustaining while against the system, and within the system, and almost falling out of the system." Her quote speaks to the contradictory ways that participants in prefigurative politics attempt to live within, against, and outside the system, all at once—an ongoing tension within *freegan.info* itself that runs throughout this book.

Sasha and Karl: Value, Surplus, and Capitalism

The fact that anarchist communities can partly maintain themselves by harvesting discarded objects tells us something about the way modern capitalist economies work. Namely, if, as one trash-picker observed, "the empire of scrounge...offered most everything I needed for surviving outside a cash-based consumer economy,"⁵² then it seems like there is some basic truth to the idea of the "ex-commodity." That is to say: if there really are anarchists squatting vacant

⁵² (Ferrell 2006: 188).

houses, gardening abandoned lots, and building bikes from discarded parts across the advanced capitalist world, then capitalism must be producing a lot of waste. More than that: at least some of that “waste” must not really be “waste” at all. But if the things in the garbage are so valuable, why are they being thrown away in the first place?

Conventional wisdom suggests that the big firms that dominate modern capitalist economies should produce very little waste. As one introductory textbook details, because they are driven by competition and the desire for profit, “Manufacturers are continually seeking ways to produce their products with less input, as well as less wasted output.”⁵³ Even the left-wing magazine *Mother Jones* comes to the same conclusion: “To save money, reduce risks, improve quality, and remain competitive, companies in nearly every sector are continually engineering waste, inefficiency, energy intensity, and toxicity out of their manufacturing and distribution.”⁵⁴ And yet, despite the apparently clear capitalist logic behind minimizing the waste of useful goods, anarchists in capitalist societies find them in abundance.

I chewed over this apparent contradiction with Sasha during the summer of 2008. At the time, Sasha was living with Adam in the basement storage space that housed the freegan.info office. Adam originally invited Sasha to New York to conduct research on the ecological impacts of free trade agreements for the Wetlands Activism Collective from that same basement. It was there, lounging between rolls of old carpets, piles of posters from long-past demonstrations against corporate environmental devastation, and mounds of salvaged bike parts, that Sasha and I spent hours discussing the intertwined origins of freeganism and waste. For Sasha, such interchanges were more than exercises in erudition: as he explained it, “Theory follows practice,

⁵³ (Porter 2002:24).

⁵⁴ (Makower 2009).

practice follows theory. Your head and your heart have to be united if you're going to live life in a way that has integrity.” Our conversations often left me scrambling to keep up with bookish references to French authors like Jean-Paul Sarte and Henri Lefebvre.

It was when our discussions turned to Karl Marx, though, that Sasha prompted me to think about how capitalism came to produce so much waste in the form of ex-commodities. I once suggested to Sasha that Marx, for all his voluminous writings, didn't have much to say about waste. He quickly corrected me, pointing out a passage from Volume 1 of *Capital*, where Marx claims that:

The capitalist takes good care that the work is done in a proper manner, and the means of production are applied directly to the purpose, so that the raw material is not wasted, and the instruments of labour [sic] are spared, i.e., only worn to the extent necessitated by their use...All wasteful consumption of raw materials or instruments of labour is strictly forbidden.⁵⁵

In short, Sasha explained, Marx thought that individual capitalist enterprises would seek to root out waste, in order to maximize production and, in turn, profit—just as more mainstream economists say they should. But this was not the end of the story. Sasha then referred me to Marx's uncompleted second volume, where—in seeming contradiction—he writes:

Capitalist production is marked by the waste of much material...[because] in the course of the gradual extension of the business, nothing is done according to a social plan, but

⁵⁵ (1976:291, 303, 1981:195). Marx noted, however, that capitalists have no such qualms about “wasting” both the time and living bodies of their workers if doing so leads to increased production (Marx 1976:374; see also Bauman 2004; Wright 2006; Yates 2011).

rather depends on the infinitely varied circumstances, means, etc. with which the individual capitalist acts. This gives rise to a major wastage of productive forces.⁵⁶

The two quotes set up the same apparent incongruity I just noted. While each firm in a capitalist economy should be driven by competition to minimize waste, the system as a whole apparently “give[s] rise” to a “major wastage” of the fruits of production.⁵⁷

Reconciling these two claims helps us tackle a major paradox: everyone seems to have an interest in reducing waste, but huge amounts of waste are produced anyway. It’s thus worth following Marx’s analysis and the line of thinking it represents a bit longer. Marx begins his treatise with the distinction between “use value” and “exchange value” that I mentioned earlier. (Coincidentally enough, freegans at times begin discussions of waste in the same way.)⁵⁸ As Marx observes, in our everyday lives most of us see commodities in terms of their use value, or their physical properties that serve our various wants and needs. The capitalist, however, is interested only in “exchange value”: the money that can be earned from selling a good.

Now, this caricature of “capitalists” is not a reference to actual people. Instead, Marx speaks of “capitalists” in terms of a social role that, in certain circumstances, people step into and out of. CEOs or factory owners might be loving parents, community leaders, and stalwart advocates for progressive causes, but when faced with the pressures of investors and the rigorous competition of the market, they act as “capitalists.” Thus, while individuals might seek to make

⁵⁶ (1978:252).

⁵⁷ This juxtaposition between the individual efficiency and collective chaos of capitalist production is more directly articulated by Engels (1978). As one socialist in the 1920s similarly insisted, “while there may be great efficiency in individual concerns [i.e., individual businesses]...the operation of the whole industrial structure is uncontrolled, willful, chaotic, and wasteful” (Chase 1929:146).

⁵⁸ As Madeline announced to one group of trash-tour attendees: “If you want to understand waste, it’s helpful to start with the distinction between ‘use-value’ and ‘exchange-value’...”

money in order to better their standard of living or to provide the world with useful products, as a class, “capitalists” are singularly focused on “production for production’s sake [and] accumulation for accumulation’s sake.”⁵⁹ A grocery store’s year-end statement sent to shareholders, for example, does not talk about the number of pounds of food sold or the people fed; instead, it speaks in terms of dollars and profits.

This single-minded pursuit of exchange value explains why capitalist economies *must* grow. As Marx points out, if we are interested in the “use value” of objects, we can trade one good for another of equal value—books for iPods, chocolates for coffee, take your pick—and nonetheless feel satisfied, since we get a qualitatively different use value out of the deal. Yet this is no longer true when the focus shifts to exchange value. There’s no reason to invest \$100 in producing, distributing, and selling something if you wind up with \$100 at the end of the process: you need to have *more* exchange value than when you started for it to be worth your while. This “unceasing movement of profit-making”⁶⁰ helps explain why, as the conservative economist Joseph Schumpeter observed, a capitalist economy “is not and cannot be stationary.”⁶¹

Despite their singular focus on profit, from Marx’s perspective, capitalists still realize that they have to ensure that the objects they produce have use value of some kind in order to sell them. Thus, the individual capitalist has a strong incentive to find technological innovations that allow him or her (or, more precisely, his or her *employees*) to produce more use value out of the same amount of labor or raw materials. This is why, on their own, firms seek to eliminate

⁵⁹ (Marx 1976:595).

⁶⁰ (Marx 1978:254).

⁶¹ (1947:31).

waste.⁶² Competition, however, ensures that such advances in efficiency are quickly copied across the industry. Prices fall, such that extra profits from increased output or waste-saving measures quickly disappear. As a result, the capitalist mode of production ensures that, over time, the same amount of exchange value—that is, money—can purchase a “progressively rising mass of use values and satisfactions.”⁶³

For people in a capitalist society, this material wealth is one of capitalism’s greatest triumphs. Even someone living below the poverty line in the United States is now likely to have a television and refrigerator, commodities that were scarce a few decades ago.⁶⁴ Yet for the capitalist—who is interested not in providing material abundance but in earning money—this inexorable rise in production is a troublesome problem. In effect, the capitalist is stuck on a treadmill, scrambling to produce more and more commodities in order to realize the same rate of profit.⁶⁵

In aggregate terms, this combination of competition, technological innovation, and thirst for profit leads to the creation of a “surplus,” a mass of material use value above and beyond what is needed for businesses and workers to maintain their existing standard of living and levels of production.⁶⁶ Marx, and some of his contemporary interpreters, have long argued that the eventually the surplus would grow so large and opportunities to profitably invest it so small that there would be a cataclysmic economic crisis. In such downturns, society would witness “gluts on the market, massive rises in inventories, idle money capital, unemployment, and failing

⁶² As Marx (1976:436–437) writes, “Capital...has an immanent drive, and a constant tendency, towards increasing the productivity of labour, in order to cheapen commodities.”

⁶³ (Marx 1981:325).

⁶⁴ (Rector and Sheffield 2011).

⁶⁵ For elaborations of this “treadmill of production” model, see (Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg 2004; Pellow 2007; Schnaiberg 1980).

⁶⁶ (Harvey 1999:5).

money rates of profit”⁶⁷ as capitalists run out of ways to sell their wares and reinvest the profits. From this perspective, capitalist economies only right themselves once some of the fruits of overproduction—the surplus—have been “eliminated.”⁶⁸

It should be fairly self-evident that this argument is profoundly flawed. After all, although “economic crises” do happen under capitalism, none has led to the final, system-wide conflagration that Marx predicted. Various Marx-inspired thinkers have pondered why, and come up with a range of answers. Rosa Luxemborg and Vladimir Lenin argued imperialism and colonialism provided productive outlets for investment and new markets for the capitalist surplus in the late 19th and 20th century. Others have explained how capitalism can keep spreading by bringing new arenas of social life under the sway of the market, selling things—like bottled water—that were previously provided outside the market.⁶⁹ Advertising can also create “artificial use values” that “instill ever more demand for commodities and the exchange values they represent” without meeting any real human needs.⁷⁰ Once again, Adam seemed to be cribbing old-school Marxism when he wrote:

A growth economy needs to manufacture reasons to keep this capital flowing, rather than having its owners free their time from work (and thus stop generating wealth) or keeping large quantities of capital in reserve... Thus, in the absence of consumer wants and needs generating real demand for products, the sellers of products must invent desires, manufacture demand, and fabricate need.

⁶⁷ (Harvey 1999:196).

⁶⁸ (Harvey 1999:193).

⁶⁹ Capitalism’s drive to “commodify” new regions of society was most famously chronicled by Polanyi (2001).

⁷⁰ (Foster, Clark, and York 2010:181).

Capitalists can also use various non-market means, like government spending, to buy up surplus production that would otherwise go unsold.⁷¹

Sasha, though, had another theory for how capitalists dealt with overproduction: waste. As he explained it, “At the end of the night, that surplus is in the garbage. The money that was made is harnessed by the capitalists, but the surplus itself...is largely decadent, it’s largely just thrown away.” As Sasha suggested, this process of ex-commodification—by which surplus goods are simply tossed—emerges when other means of dealing with the fruits of overproduction have been exhausted. Sasha was not, of course, the first to think of this: as one Marxist theorist summarized, “the waste of exchange value can be attenuated by destroying production (i.e. use value)...The final result is that use value is destroyed to protect exchange value.”⁷² Yet what Sasha’s experience dumpster diving with *freegan.info* seemed to reveal was that, far from being an occasional event,⁷³ this kind of waste was central to capitalism. As Sasha postulated, by shrinking the total mass of use value through waste, capitalists can ensure that what remains can be sold for an adequate profit.

Even if we find this idea credible, the mechanisms by which ex-commodification happens are still subtle. After all, the individual capitalist or firm really does—even from a Marxist perspective—have a strong incentive to produce as efficiently as possible and to minimize waste on the factory floor. At the same time, though, capitalists *also* have an interest in ensuring that, everywhere else along the commodity chain, as much goes to waste as possible. It

⁷¹ See Baran and Sweezy (1966).

⁷² (Horton 1997:132).

⁷³ Harvey (1999:411) describes something akin to ex-commodification as a “normal facet of circulation” that comes from “miscalculation, lack of foresight, poor information, unreliable transportation systems, etc.” but does not recognize it as an important strategy for dealing with the surplus.

is not just, as some critics have pointed out, that “once the value of a commodity is realized through its purchase...capital no longer cares what happens to that item.”⁷⁴ It is that capitalists actually when a buyer does not fully use a product and instead buys a new one. Individual managers, owners, and employees might be loathe to see their products go to waste, but if we start from some basic Marxist assumptions, it is clear that, to rework a classic phrase from Marx himself, capitalism “sweats waste from every pore.”⁷⁵

This is all rather technical and arcane, but Sasha managed to summarize it from that Brooklyn basement in straightforward terms:

Marx develops this idea of overproduction, and the unsustainable quality of capitalism, because of surplus. It occurs because people are being paid too little to buy what they produce. So what happens? You might say that the price of the commodity goes down, or the business becomes bankrupt because it can’t continue to produce at that price.

He patiently continued:

What we have to do is investigate how this is kept in check. Imperialism, colonialism—they allow expansion to continue. But the system also generates waste. There’s enough to go around for the entire world, but because people aren’t able to afford to buy it, it is more profitable for the capitalist to throw things away than to give them out.

Far from being a flaw in the operation of free markets, Sasha’s reworking of Marx suggested that the wasting of ex-commodities—the “discard of human use value”⁷⁶—can result from the most basic capitalist imperatives of endless growth and profit.

⁷⁴ (M. Yates 2011:1691).

⁷⁵ The original line is that “Circulation sweats money from every pore” (Marx 1976:208).

⁷⁶ (Horton 1997:128).

A Brief History of Waste in America

Skeptical readers are, by now, likely rolling their eyes at this lengthy exposition of the ideas of a long-dead and dismissed thinker. Nonetheless, Sasha insisted that if I looked into the “garbage bins of history,” I could find that there was some truth to his argument about the relationship between waste and capitalism. This book does not pretend to offer a comprehensive history of waste in America: such an effort would be redundant, as in-depth monographs are already available.⁷⁷ Suffice it to say that the record establishes that capitalism has not everywhere and at all times been a “wasteful” economic system. Nor is it necessarily fair to say that capitalism is more “wasteful,” in aggregate terms, than its alternatives.⁷⁸ A more revealing approach is to look at *why* certain things are wasted at certain times and not others, and what it is about the present that gives rise to the ex-commodity glut.

In keeping with Marx’s (and many mainstream economists’) claims, early capitalists were committed to minimizing waste and reusing the by-products that they did generate.⁷⁹ A transatlantic trade in scrap metal and used rags furnished some of the earliest inputs for steel forges and paper mills.⁸⁰ Major technological advances, such as the discovery of petroleum as a fuel, came through attempts to find uses for the wastes of industrial processes.⁸¹ Consider the case of animal bones, which today are practically worthless. In stark contrast, in early America:

⁷⁷ See (Humes 2012; Kelly 1973; Rogers 2005; Strasser 1999).

⁷⁸ Rathje and Murphy (1992:35), for example, find that the rate of garbage accumulation at Fresh Kills landfill in New York is no more than that of Ancient Troy. Gille (2008) offers a more up-to-date comparison of waste in socialist and capitalist countries. As she notes, however, looking at sheer volumes of garbage is misleading, because it tells us nothing about what *kinds* of things are being discarded.

⁷⁹ (Molotch 2003:236).

⁸⁰ (Zimring 2005:13–19).

⁸¹ (O’Brien 2008:64–65).

Bones were a valuable commodity. The best were used for handles and buttons. The next best were ground and charred to be used by sugar refiners to filter the dark liquid they pressed from the cane; bone black was also used to make pigments and china. Even the least desirable bones fetched an attractive price from the emerging industry for commercial fertilizers...Ninety percent of the marrow could be converted to tallow that was valuable to chandlers and soap makers and to the rapidly expanding chemical industry.⁸²

At a less concrete level, innovations such as assembly lines, too, were designed to “eliminat[e] wasted time and motion in the workplace.”⁸³ Although it is certainly an overstatement to claim that in this time period “almost nothing went to waste,”⁸⁴ thrift and careful reuse were clearly a central part of the developing capitalist economy of the United States through the 19th century.

This is still the story capitalists likes to tell about themselves: that individual firms seek to root out waste to maximize the production of sellable goods and, in turn, profit. In truth, though, minimizing waste was a response to the particular conditions of the era. Waste elimination was imperative because it responded to the very real scarcity of labor, raw materials, and investment capital that industry confronted.⁸⁵ The neo-classical economists that dominate policymaking are still obsessed with the idea that we face a “scarcity” of economic production, but the discipline’s tether to reality is becoming steadily more frayed.⁸⁶ In the middle of the 20th century, the main barrier to continued growth confronted by the capitalist economy switched from one of scarcity to one of excess. As Marx predicted, the key challenge of post-War

⁸² (Miller 2000: 40)

⁸³ (Lears 2011:211).

⁸⁴ (Rogers 2005:36).

⁸⁵ McNeil and Vertis (2011)

⁸⁶ (Abbott 2014:5).

American capitalism shifted from that of creating a sufficiently large surplus to figuring out how to consume and invest that surplus.

In the face of this looming problem of overproduction, a wide-range of strategies coming from *outside* the market, largely under the banner of Keynesian economics, were crucial for keeping the capitalist economy humming. The post World War-II years were the era in which the United States became a “consumers republic,”⁸⁷ as private corporations—under pressure from vibrant labor unions—offered workers steadily rising wages that, in turn, allowed those same workers to buy more and more of what they produced. Welfare programs, military spending, and the construction of infrastructure further stimulated demand.⁸⁸ The issue of falling profits was partly mitigated by collaboration between large corporations, which could keep prices high and limit production thanks to America’s unquestioned dominance of the world economy and the absence of major foreign competition.⁸⁹ Together, these factors alleviated the problem of overproduction created by free-market competition and technological innovation by distributing some of the surplus through non-market means.

This post-War era made the abundance of capitalism widely available to an unparalleled extent, but it had its limits.⁹⁰ As corporations found, a population that had just lived through the Great Depression was not always willing to buy all that companies could produce, even if they were paid enough to do so. But what would happen, executives and boards wondered, once everyone in America had a refrigerator, a car, and a house—items that were luxuries for a privileged few just years before? By the end of the 1950s, economists were already fretting that

⁸⁷ (Cohen 2003), see also (Jacobs 2005).

⁸⁸ (Baran and Sweezy 1966).

⁸⁹ (Arrighi 1990; Go 2011).

⁹⁰ While, of course, excluding huge segments of the population—such as racial minorities—from that same abundance.

“the automobile-durable consumer-goods suburbia complex had lost...the capacity to drive forward American growth.”⁹¹ To put it back into Marx’s terms, the American economy was producing more use value than could be profitably sold.

The result was that “waste”—both metaphorical and material—began to seep out of every corner of the American economy. Corporations engaged in a range of different forms of “conspicuous waste,” lavishing money on private jets, expense accounts, and grandiose headquarters that created the *appearance* of value but met no genuine need.⁹² They did much the same with the products they were selling. Starting in the 1950s, firms introduced “planned obsolescence”—the “deliberate curtailment of a product’s lifespan”⁹³—on a large scale.

As cultural critic Vance Packard documented in his exposé *The Waste Makers*, carmakers were at the forefront of this trend. In the 1950s, the rate of genuine innovation in car manufacture slowed. Automakers compensated with rapid changes in “style”—useless accouterments like tail fins—that could “destroy completely the value of possessions even while their utility remains un-impaired,” thus pushing people to buy a new car while their old one still worked.⁹⁴ As Ford Motor Company’s head of styling explained, “We design a car to make a man unhappy with his 1957...about the end of 1959”⁹⁵ Planned obsolescence, as another critic raged, “equals garbage”:

Tail fins on the new car: junk the old. New color-coordinated kitchen utensils: throw the old ones away. New tuning controls or color dials or whatever on the TV set: get a new

⁹¹ (Rostow 1971:xv).

⁹² (Baran and Sweezy 1966:45).

⁹³ (Cooper 2005:57).

⁹⁴ (Packard 1960:58).

⁹⁵ (qtd. in McNeill and Vrtis 2011:522)

one...Thousands of appliances—many of them in working condition—hit the streets every year for the garbage man to haul away.⁹⁶

Superfluous packaging, too, emerged to address the oversupply of use value. In pre-20th century America, consumers had to buy packages for their goods themselves, and thus frequently made their own, returned what they could back to retailers, or found creative reuses for it.⁹⁷ By adding excess material to a given product and incorporating its cost into a single price, though, manufacturers could squeeze more exchange value from the consumer without adding any use. In the decade after the 1950s, the volume of packaging in the waste stream increased 50%.⁹⁸

Advertising was an integral part of the process of restructuring capitalism towards disposing of an overabundant surplus. Although we typically think of advertisements as intended to convince people to switch from one product to another, the aggregate impact of advertising is simply to get people to consume *more* of everything. As one pair of disgruntled Marxists writing in the 1960s asserted, advertising:

Hammer[s] into the heads of people the unquestioned desirability, indeed the imperative necessity, of owning the newest product that comes on the market...Genuinely new or different products, however, are not easy to come by, even in our age of rapid scientific and technological advance. Hence much of the newness with which the consumer is systematically bombarded is either fraudulent or related trivially and in many cases even negatively to the function and serviceability of the product.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ (Kelly 1973:33). One survey, for example, found that 2/3rds of discarded household appliances are either still working or in repairable condition (Cooper 2005:60).

⁹⁷ Strasser (1999:66–67).

⁹⁸ (Kelly 1973:62).

⁹⁹ (Baran and Sweezy 1966:129).

In the fifteen years after the end of World War II, advertising spending tripled.¹⁰⁰ The result, as the *Time* business section approvingly noted, was that “US consumers no longer hold on to suits, coats, and dresses as if they were heirlooms...Furniture, refrigerators, rugs—all once bought to last for years or life—are now replaced.”¹⁰¹ In 1955, *Life* magazine christened America’s new wasteful patterns of consumption as the “throwaway society.”

Freegan.info’s various manifestos make abundant references to the waste-producing processes that emerged in post-War America. One of Adam’s essays, for example, documents the persistence of strategies used to convince people to buy things they don’t need and discard still-functioning commodities:

In a society where business success means keeping consumers buying, disposable goods are promoted as preferable to reusable, products are built shoddily to ensure that consumers will keep replacing them, [and] manufacturers price-gouge on replacement parts to keep consumers buying entire new items instead of repairing old ones. The fashion industry convinces consumers that last year’s clothing is out of style. Computer manufacturers introduce new operating systems and software that carry ‘excess baggage’ that ensure that they will run poorly on older machines. Bombarded with advertisements, consumers dump their computer monitors and TVs for LCD and plasma screens, their old clothes for new fashions, to use plastic-ware once rather than washing, storing, and reusing, and all of this is added to the waste stream.¹⁰²

Adam’s rage was partly born of his ongoing frustration with the host of donated computers and electronics that cluttered the freegan office. Even computers just a few years old and in good

¹⁰⁰ (Cohen 2003:301).

¹⁰¹ (qtd. in Packard 1960:36).

¹⁰² <http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-philosophy/intro-to-freegan-philosophy/>

physical shape never seemed to work with new, obligatory updates to software: proof, in his eyes, that planned obsolescence was alive and well.

Still, none of the forms of waste described above really fits the description of an “ex-commodity.” While corporate expense accounts and military spending might seem “wasteful” in the sense of being unnecessary, they don’t necessarily result in still-useful commodities going into the garbage. Planned obsolescence, advertising, and excess packaging may have meant that consumers bought (and subsequently, disposed of) more than they otherwise would, but these purchases were still things that were used—at least, to a degree—by someone. Understanding the origins of the ex-commodity requires updating a literature on capitalism’s waste, largely written in the 1950s and 1960s, to take account of a new phase of capitalist development: neo-liberalism.

Neo-Liberalism and the Birth of the Ex-Commodity

Starting in the late 1970s, the combination of state intervention, corporate collaboration, and rising wages that helped deal with the surplus of over-production in the halcyon days of post-war America unraveled. Since then, Keynesian economics has been displaced across both the developed and developing world by neo-liberalism. Broadly speaking, neo-liberalism is a political and economic project that aims to restore profitability by increasing the reach of the market, cutting government services, reducing regulations, weakening labor unions, and lowering barriers to trade.¹⁰³ Neo-liberalism represents a new, powerful wave of commoditization, by which things that were previously provided outside the market—health care, mass transit, electric or water utilities—are enveloped by it.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ For some basic discussions of neo-liberalism, see (Centeno and Cohen 2012; Evans and Sewell 2013; Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002; Harvey 2005).

¹⁰⁴ (Goldman 2005; Standing 2011:26).

Far from solving the problems of overproduction, though, neo-liberalism has greatly exacerbated them. As barriers to trade have fallen, factories in East Asia have *added* to an already-existing overcapacity in the manufacturing sector and undermined attempts to limit production through corporate cooperation.¹⁰⁵ In fact, growing international competition has forced firms to be even *more* efficient in production, thus increasing the total mass of use value to be sold.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, by eviscerating labor unions and keeping wages stagnant, firms have made it so that workers have less exchange value with which to buy the things they make.¹⁰⁷ Cutbacks to welfare programs and spending on infrastructure have further reduced the capacity of citizens and the state to buy up the surplus.¹⁰⁸

At least theoretically, the result of this confluence of expanded commodification, growing production, and lessening capacity to consume it, is ex-commodification. Indeed, something akin to the process of ex-commodification has already been observed by scholars analyzing the growth of global un- and under-employment. While in the past, capitalism needed workers to “commodify” their labor and sell it on the market, capitalism is increasingly ex-commodifying superfluous workers by making them redundant and effectively expelling them from the labor market.¹⁰⁹ The tragic result, as Bauman observes, is “wasted lives”: people who can neither survive outside the market nor make a living within it.¹¹⁰

But there is evidence to suggest that it is not just human lives that are being wasted. For example, while numerous scholars have noted the growing importance of consumer debt in

¹⁰⁵ (Brenner 2006).

¹⁰⁶ (Makower 2009).

¹⁰⁷ Western and Rosenfeld (2011) find that de-unionization explains from 1/5th to 1/3rd of the growth in wage inequality since the 1970s. See also (Bell 2009:1280).

¹⁰⁸ (Korpi 2003; Pierson 1994)

¹⁰⁹ (Standing 2011).

¹¹⁰ (2004:5).

fueling growth, its hidden twin may very well be ex-commodified waste.¹¹¹ During much of the 2000s, a run-up in household debt fuelled a construction boom that drove economic expansion. Yet the construction industry, by one calculation, produced a half-million more houses each year than there were people with the economic means to live in them.¹¹² Thus, although it has received far less attention, construction of new houses has been accompanied by the annihilation of old ones, a veritable “demolition derby” that peaked at the destruction of 360,000 houses a year in the mid-2000s.¹¹³

Destroying homes in a nation blighted by homelessness unveils the perverse logic of ex-commodification. If you are a landlord who only owns one house or one apartment building, it makes no sense to leave it vacant or have it demolished. But if you’re a large property-holder with multiple parcels, it is perversely self-serving to ex-commodify otherwise useful structures, because it raises prices for those buildings left standing on the market.¹¹⁴ Banks virtually admitted that this was their strategy when, at the height of the foreclosure crisis, they began bulldozing repossessed homes rather than selling them at low prices.¹¹⁵ The housing sector is a dramatic example of how scarcity can be manufactured through ex-commodification—that is, the deliberate destruction of use value.

¹¹¹ (Frank 2011; Graeber 2011). Debt “allowed many in the developed world to consume at a prodigious rate even as their wages stagnated” (Centeno and Cohen 2012:327).

¹¹² (Kennedy 2009:144).

¹¹³ (Byles 2005:11; see also Olson 2007). This analysis of the ex-commodification of space is consistent with Harvey’s (1978) argument that the surplus would be fixed in the built environment and Holton’s (1997) claim that a proportion of the built environment would ultimately be wasted.

¹¹⁴ A far more thorough discussion of “abject land capital” can be found in Giles (2013:Ch.3).

¹¹⁵ (Gandel 2011). The U.S. government has long facilitated the planned obsolescence of housing by subsidizing the construction of new buildings and limiting funding for repairing old ones (Jackson 1985:206–207), as well as by spending billions bulldozing neighborhoods under the banner of “urban renewal” (Byles 2005:216).

Evaluating the scale of “ex-commodification” in other sectors is difficult. Reliable statistics on waste are hard to come by, and rarely do they provide a breakdown of the waste stream that allows us to assess what proportion of “waste” is actually still useable. One global market analysis shows that waste production has and will continue to outstrip economic growth—indirect evidence that waste ticks up at more advanced stages of capitalism.¹¹⁶ For some specific commodities, the evidence is less equivocal. America now throws out 68 pounds of textiles per person per year, encouraged by constant changes in fashion and sweatshop production that makes replacing clothes cheaper than repairing or maintaining them.¹¹⁷ Estimates suggest that 25% of books produced go unsold and are pulped.¹¹⁸ Three *billion* magazines are sent yearly directly from retailers to the landfill without ever being read.¹¹⁹

Despite well-publicized popular narratives that the West is shifting to a “service” or “information” economy, capitalism is still fundamentally a giant machine for producing, selling, and destroying material commodities.¹²⁰ This is particularly evident with what would seem to be the most modern sector of them all: electronics. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, “A great deal of what is labeled as ‘e-waste’ is actually not waste at all; rather, it is whole electronic equipment or parts that are readily marketable for reuse or can be recycled for materials recovery.”¹²¹ Nonetheless, less than a quarter of e-waste is recycled; the rate for the

¹¹⁶ This prediction comes from the leftist, anti-capitalist think tank “Bank of America—Merrill Lynch” (Nahal, Lucas-Leclin, and Dolie 2013:1)

¹¹⁷ (Cline 2012).

¹¹⁸ (Borealis Center 2008:31).

¹¹⁹ (Paper Project 2001).

¹²⁰ For critiques of the notion that the economic is “de-materializing,” see (Clement 2009; Krausmann et al. 2009; Steinberger, Krausmann, and Eisenmenger 2010).

¹²¹ (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2011a).

125 million cell phones discarded per year is even lower.¹²² The rest piles up in toxic e-waste graveyards, often abroad;¹²³ electronic waste is now one of the largest categories of exports from the United States to China.¹²⁴

The least systematic yet seemingly most incontrovertible evidence for ex-commodification comes from dumpsters themselves. Most of the freegans I know are confident that, on a long enough time horizon, virtually every commodity that gets produced will eventually wind up in a commercial dumpster—that is to say, wasted before it even gets sold. The freegan website presents a partial inventory of what can be found in the trash outside of retailers:

Freegans are able to obtain food, beverages, books, toiletries, magazines, comic books, newspapers, videos, kitchenware, appliances, music (CDs, cassettes, records, etc.), carpets, musical instruments, clothing, rollerblades, scooters, furniture, vitamins, electronics, animal care products, games, toys, bicycles, artwork, and just about any other type of consumer good.¹²⁵

Of course, the most common finds are relatively cheap, non-durable goods, such as the plastic costume pieces freegans regularly find outside Party City, or the Tupperware at the Container Store. But, on one storied occasion, we found a working iPod.

¹²² By one count, U.S. consumers discard upwards of ten million iPhones *alone* each year (Dediu 2011).

¹²³ (Urbina 2013).

¹²⁴ Crang et al. (2013:12).

¹²⁵ I once thought it was impossible to find alcohol in a dumpster, but the discovery of two six-packs of beer in a supermarket bin during the preparation of this book proved me wrong (a few trash tour attendees once tried to brew beer out of some pumpkins we found; I never learned the results, though). Janet told me that she had found marijuana in the garbage on one tour, but left it behind (there was media present).

While for many anarchists the processes that go into producing these commodities are themselves objectionable, the fact that many of them never get used but are instead discarded as *ex-commodities* makes the absurdity of endlessly expanding production that much more offensive. Yet while ex-commodification may be striking, it is also entirely explicable. As Sasha himself suggested, the large-scale wasting of useful things under neo-liberal capitalism can be traced to a two main processes: overproduction and commoditization. The competition and technical innovation that have made modern capitalist societies materially the richest the world has ever seen also entail massive overproduction. While in the mid-twentieth century, rising wages, controls on competition, and state intervention helped to dispose of this surplus outside the market, neo-liberal policies—intended to arrest a decline in private-sector profits—have undermined these strategies. As such, there are simply too many goods—too much use value—chasing not enough money. It thus becomes perfectly rational for producers and retailers to throw out useful things in order to fetch a sufficient price for what they sell. As freegans see it, at huge ecological costs, scarcity is being continually manufactured through waste.

Thus far, though, I have left out what is, for freegans, perhaps the most important ex-commodity of them all: food.

2. Wasted Food and the Emergence of Freeganism

I interviewed Wendy in February 2009, after her Wednesday-night shift as a mechanic in the freegan bike workshop. The workshop was located in the basement of the 123 Community Space, an anarchist infoshop in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn that freegan.info shared with the In Our Hearts Collective and Anarchist Black Cross. Upstairs, crammed into a single long room festooned with posters from past direct actions, 123 hosted a press for silk-screening t-shirts, a library of anarchist literature, and a kitchen where Jason often cooked meals from dumpster-dived food. Downstairs was the freegan bike workshop, stuffed to the gills with half-completed bike frames and scattered surplus parts in various states of rust and degradation. That night, Wendy—her shoulder-length, salt-and-pepper hair flowing freely, and her glasses half-falling off her nose—was moving frantically in the cramped space, helping a mix of hip-looking white activists from Williamsburg and African-American teens from the surrounding community with bike repairs. During the two nights a week it opened, the bike workshop was an ongoing platform for freegan.info’s “prefigurative politics”: the use of direct, material actions to actualize the anarchist strategy of building a new society “in the shell of the old.”

Wendy’s own activist history is closely bound with the founding of freegan.info. Her narrative also provides a window into how anti-capitalist activists came to see recovering food waste as a particularly potent political act. Wendy grew up in a middle-class, suburban area of South Jersey, and described her parents as “bargain shoppers” who taught her the arts of acquiring stuff as cheaply as possible. When Wendy was twelve, she abruptly decided to go vegetarian after a sharp, emotionally-charged realization that pork came from pigs that were little different from her family dog. She insisted on an “animal rights” theme for her Bat Mitzvah, and, in seventh grade, tried—unsuccessfully—to start an animal rights club at school. She tried her

hand again at vegetarian activism in college, this time more successfully. At the freshman activities fair, she ran into the table for the campus animal rights group: “I thought to myself, ‘You are the people I’ve been waiting for all these years.’” As she recalled, “I missed, maybe, three meetings in the course of four-and-a-half years with them.”

Over time, though, Wendy began to question whether conventional social movement tactics—like waving signs or signing petitions—were effective. Reflecting on the protests outside Kentucky Fried Chicken she participated in, she admitted, “We stood by a highway and chanted to people driving by in cars. That’s what we did. That was it.” It was her encounter with *ex-commodities* on her first ever dumpster dive, though, that cemented for her the conviction that animal abuse could not be ended without tackling something even bigger: capitalism. The realization that many animals were not just commodified and eaten but actually *ex-commodified* and discarded proved to be profoundly emotionally distressing. As she avowed, “No one deserves to have their life wasted, because that’s the biggest disgrace of all: to have a whole life wasted, crushed in a garbage truck. I won’t stand for it any more than I would sit and watch my friends die.”

For Wendy, waste was more than just an outrage. As she explained it, the super-abundance of waste proved that any political strategy focused on getting people to buy different commodities, without challenging the economic structure as a whole, was bound to fail:

Veganism equates your decisions with a direct market decision. Your financial contribution directly effects this change in the market. You use your buying power or whatever. And that’s totally perverted version of what the actual picture is... Your little decision is such a small factor in the greater economic decision of what’s produced and marketed.

The entire notion that individual consumers could be effective activists, she pointed out, rests on confidence in the elasticity and efficiency of markets: that is, the assumption that if one person stops buying animal-based food, then the production of animal-based foods will go down. Yet, as she was viscerally reminded on every dumpster dive, food markets are only imperfectly responsive to consumer demand. “I hate that button that says ‘Veganism is direct action.’ Not even close,” she told me, adding for effect, “All the animal rights campaigns that I’ve seen can’t even begin to touch the issues brought up by the industrial world’s waste.”

After college, Wendy moved to New York City, convinced that “all the activists, all the culture was there—not in the suburbs.” New York offered her a wide-range of activist models: she volunteered with the League of Humane Voters, which attempted to advance animal rights through electoral means, and the Wetlands Activism Collective and Food Not Bombs, two groups focused on anti-capitalist direct-action. Over time, Wendy moved towards the latter approach, which emphasized building alternatives to the capitalist system rather than working within it. Her lifestyle changed accordingly. In order to devote more of her energy to activism, she eschewed long-term, stable employment, looking for “short-term gigs and only short-term gigs.” As she admitted, the result was that she was “only barely getting by,” but for her, to give up her activism and focus on paid work was something she “couldn’t afford in her own way.” She supplemented her small earnings by dumpster diving as much of her food, clothing, and other goods as possible.

Wendy picked up a copy of the pamphlet “Why Freegan?” at an animal rights conference in 2000—around the same time that some people she met started to respond to her descriptions of her lifestyle by calling her a “freegan.” She met Adam through her involvement in Wetlands. Both of them were using waste recovery to support themselves and wanted to share the strategy

with others, leading them to start the freegan.info website in 2003. As she explained it, she was frustrated by the sense that “It’s really hard to even find examples of how not to be in capitalism. It’s everywhere around us.”

The freegan project was an attempt to provide just such an example, and it drew a surprising amount of attention. Over time, freegan.info and its collective dumpster dives went from being a way of supporting activists engaging in *other* kinds of direct action to a form of direct action in itself. It is this emergence of freeganism as a form of prefigurative politics using capitalism’s waste—particularly, ex-commodified food—that this chapter recounts.

Ex-Commodification From Farm to Fork

The last few years have seen the publication—in rapid succession—of a host of books and reports that catalog the myriad ways that potentially edible food gets wasted.¹ Often, these exposés start at the point of production and work their way through every step in the food chain, showing how food bleeds out of the system at every point. One study found no less than seventy-four different behaviors that could be tied to food waste.² Following the lead set by the freegans themselves, though, I want to take a different approach. Rather than beginning at the farm, or the supermarket, or the kitchen, I start with food’s place within the broader capitalist economy.

As with waste in general, advanced capitalist countries do not have a monopoly on wasting food. Food waste probably started at the same time as agriculture itself, as farmers planted more than they actually needed to hedge against poor weather or losses to pests.³ Reports

¹ (Bloom 2010; European Commission 2010; Gunders 2012; Gustavsson et al. 2011; Institution of Mechanical Engineers 2013; Stuart 2009).

² (Bloom 2010:268).

³ (Stuart 2009).

claim that as much as half of the Soviet Union's agricultural production went to waste.⁴ Even in countries with widespread malnutrition, like India, a significant amount of food rots away thanks to underdeveloped infrastructure and poor storage.⁵ What makes food waste in the United States, Western Europe, and other developed capitalist economies distinctive is that it happens even though we have the technical know-how to virtually eliminate it.

In understanding why preventable waste doesn't get prevented, it is worth revisiting two themes from the previous chapter. The first is overproduction. I have already discussed the old Marxist saw that capitalism has an inherent tendency towards producing more than people can or will actually buy. Whether or not we find this argument convincing in its totality, there's a strong argument to be made that this problem is particularly acute with respect to food.⁶ The reason why is simple: demand for food is fairly static. In contrast to cars, houses, or clothes, there is a biological limit to how much food people can consume (obesity epidemic notwithstanding). Food companies can try to work around this by adding "value" to their products through packaging, marketing, or by feeding low-price grains to animals to create higher-priced meat (all of which create waste, as we will discover later). Nonetheless, the food sector is still one of the most cutthroat competitive in the U.S., with notoriously razor-thin profit margins.⁷ If demand for their products has an upper limit, how can companies engaged in producing, distributing, and selling food achieve the never-ending growth required by shareholders?

⁴ (Przeworski 1991:15). The author does not, however, provide a source for his figure.

⁵ (Gustavsson et al. 2011; Institution of Mechanical Engineers 2013; Parfitt, Barthel, and Macnaughton 2010). Although it is worth noting that some "waste" in countries like Ethiopia is created by the dumping of surplus food from the U.S. through food aid, which causes prices for local farmers to plummet (Gille 2012).

⁶ (Mann 1990).

⁷ (Nestle 2002).

The answer relates to the second process, commodification. Most of us are so accustomed to the idea of buying food that we forget that for most of human history—as freegans are quick to point out—food has *not* been a commodity. Instead of being acquired through the market, the norm has been for households or small communities to gather or produce food for their own consumption. Even as capitalism spread in 18th century England, people still saw food as something that had to be protected from the market—and rioted when they were forced to buy bread at market prices.⁸ As E.P. Thompson writes in a famous essay, “Millers and...bakers were considered as servants of the community, working not for a profit but for a fair allowance.”⁹ According to classical political economists, separating people from their means of producing food—that is to say, turning *food* into a commodity—was instrumental in forcing people to turn their *labor* into a commodity for purchase by capitalist businesses and industries.¹⁰

The ascendancy of neo-liberalism has heralded a new wave of commodification of food.¹¹ And commodity agriculture, being a capitalist enterprise, is premised on the notion that “the primary objective of farming should be to produce as much food/fiber as possible for the least cost.”¹² But, as I have already pointed out, food doesn’t work like other commodities: demand for it is limited, and surplus food cannot simply be stored or hoarded indefinitely. The mismatch between attempts to treat food as a commodity and the problematic of overproduction, two points first raised to me by Adam, is at the heart of contemporary food waste.

There may have once been a time when American farmers did not grow enough to feed the entire country. By as early as the start of the 20th century, though, farmers—their yields

⁸ (Bohstedt 2010)

⁹ (1971:83).

¹⁰ (Friedmann 1982:S255).

¹¹ (Patel 2012).

¹² (Lyson and Gupill 2004:372)

swelling thanks to advances in plant breeding, fertilizers, and harvesting technologies—were already producing more than consumers would buy.¹³ Agricultural processors and distributors quickly realized that destroying part of production was the only way to maintain profits. As one contemporary economist documented:

In 1920, thousands of gallons of milk were poured into rivers and creeks of southern Illinois. In the fall of the same year, the Potomac River below Washington was afloat with watermelons—a trainload having been dumped from the wharves to avoid breaking the city price...Every few years a large percentage of the Maine potato crop is left to rot in the ground.¹⁴

With the arrival of the Great Depression, agricultural prices nose-dived. It was in this grim context of massive overproduction and plummeting buying power that John Steinbeck, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, described the capitalist mentality towards the surplus:

Burn coffee for fuel in the ships. Burn corn to keep warm, it makes a hot fire.
Dump potatoes in the rivers and place guards along the banks to keep the hungry people from fishing them out. Slaughter the pigs and bury them, and let the putrescence drip down into the earth.

Under pressure from the agricultural states that made up a key part of his New Deal coalition, President Roosevelt took the first steps to deal with the agricultural surplus. He inaugurated a long period in which the U.S. government would use non-market means to limit production and find outlets for farmers' excesses.¹⁵ Under the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, the federal government mandated that a portion of agricultural acreage for certain products

¹³ (Nestle 2002:34).

¹⁴ (Chase 1929:193).

¹⁵ (Finegold and Skocpol 1995).

be left unplanted, and purchased surplus food to raise prices.¹⁶ Perversely, much of the surplus the government bought was still left to rot.¹⁷ Public outrage led to the first federal food-aid program: a portion of surplus agricultural production was taken off the market and given to those in need.

By the end of World War II, silos were once again bursting with excess grain. This time, corporations and their allies in government looked abroad for an outlet. Over one-quarter of aid given under the famous Marshall Plan, by which the U.S. supported the rebuilding of war-torn Europe, actually consisted of surplus agricultural inputs and outputs.¹⁸ By 1956, nearly half of U.S. foreign “aid” came in the form of dumping agricultural surpluses on developing countries.¹⁹ Agricultural policy at home followed a similar logic. Food stamps were institutionalized in the 1960s to create consumers for the food the government was stockpiling through its agricultural programs.²⁰ The same could be said for the Federal School Lunch program, which relied on surplus commodities and grew from \$300 million to \$3 billion over the course of the 1970s.²¹ Although these programs served many ends, one of them was to allow capitalist agriculture to fulfill its primary imperative: continued growth. They did so, however, by intervening in the market and, in so doing, preventing some of that food from going to waste.

¹⁶ (Finegold 1982).

¹⁷ (Winders 2009:52–53).

¹⁸ (Friedmann 1982:S261).

¹⁹ (Winders 2009:136). The U.S. remains the only major donor country that gives direct aid in the form of food, rather than purchasing food on local markets in recipient countries (Nixon 2013). As a result, the U.S. food aid budget feeds 17 million fewer people than it could, and food aid undercuts developing-world producers—in certain places actually *worsening* hunger. Efforts to reform the program have foundered in the face of stiff resistance from farmers, agribusiness, and transportation companies (Ibid.).

²⁰ (DeVault and Pitts 1984; Poppendieck 1999).

²¹ (Belasco 2007:134)

These various strategies of surplus management have been undermined by neo-liberalism. Of course, the U.S. government continues to spend astonishing amounts on farm subsidies: \$256 billion since 1995²² (although they go to a steadily dwindling number of small family farms and an ever-more-consolidated cadre of agribusinesses).²³ The form of these subsidies, however, has changed in important ways. The 1996 Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act—better known as the “Freedom to Farm” Act, which speaks to the neo-liberal logic behind it—replaced limits to production imposed in the 1930s with direct payments to farmers regardless of how much they produced.²⁴ Expanding federal crop-insurance programs now mean that farmers can confidently plant crops no one needs on marginal land with nearly zero risk of financial loss.²⁵

Another sign of the growing commodification of food under neo-liberalism can be seen from the financial industry’s burgeoning interest in speculating on agriculture.²⁶ In 1991—taking advantage of loosening government regulations—Goldman Sachs bundled contracts to purchase eighteen agricultural products into a “Commodity Index” which it then began selling.²⁷ From 2003 to 2008, investment ballooned from \$13 billion to \$317 billion.²⁸ According to the financial

²² (Environmental Working Group 2014).

²³ While American farmers continue to be shielded from the market, those in the developing world have had no such good fortune, as the U.S., through intermediaries like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, has pushed developing countries to slash supports for small farmers (as was the case with NAFTA in Mexico). The result has been food riots, increased hunger, and the collapse of peasant agriculture (Pechlaner and Otero 2010; Walton and Seddon 1994).

²⁴ (Winders 2009).

²⁵ (Nixon 2012).

²⁶ Drawing on Marx, McMichael (2012:690) notes that “the general accumulation crisis [evident in the economic crisis of 2008]...has resulted in international capital markets gravitating towards agriculture as a relatively safe investment haven.”

²⁷ (Kaufman 2010:32).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

industry's logic, food was just another commodity: stated one manager at an exchange for trading grain, "I view what we're working with [food] as widgets...I think being an employee at an exchange is different from adding value to the food system."²⁹ Yet food is not a "widget," although treating it as such has very real effects. In 2008, speculators bought an unprecedented amount of futures contracts—agreements to purchase a portion of the harvest—for wheat. Even though the year saw record harvests, food prices spiked, causing hunger and food riots worldwide.³⁰

The hand of neo-liberalism can also be seen in changes with regard to the consumer end of the food chain. Food banks and emergency food pantries are now such a normalized part of the landscape that few remember that, in post-war America, they virtually disappeared. Groups like City Harvest in New York only emerged in response to cutbacks in social services imposed under the Reagan administration.³¹ Social programs have fared little better under Democratic Presidents: welfare reform passed in 1996 led to a \$37 per month decrease in food stamps' purchasing power—no small figure for a program that provides about \$1 per person per meal.³² Although much has been made of the increase in the number of Americans on food stamps during the Obama administration, the government has continued to allow the ability of food stamps to *purchase* food to erode.³³

Slashing food stamps, reforming agricultural subsidies, and turning food into a financial toy might seem disconnected, but they obey a common logic. Each treats food as a commodity that goes to whomever can offer the highest price for it. Yet the ongoing commodification

²⁹ Ibid., 34.

³⁰ Ibid., 33. See also (Vanhaute 2011).

³¹ (Poppendieck 1999:3).

³² (Rosenbaum 2007).

³³ (Nord 2013).

actually reduces outlets for surplus food, despite endless increases in production. In fact, nearly 10% of crops in the United States are never harvested.³⁴ The reason why is simple: in a context of twinned overproduction and commodification, it is more profitable to plough some crops under than feed them to people. Perverse as it might seem, the wanton destruction of food is occasionally openly coordinated and endorsed. In 2009, California dairy farms called for the dumping of milk from two million cows in order to raise the price.³⁵ That there might be needy people who couldn't afford even the low price of milk, evidently, had no place in a calculation made with a hard-nosed business logic.

Nonetheless, even after losses in processing, transport, and distribution, U.S. farmers make available 3,796 k/cal per-person per-day.³⁶ This is far more than just a few decades ago, and makes for the most abundant food supply in the world—and possibly in human history. To put it in less abstract terms, according to the USDA, in 2011 “each American had available to consume, on average, 54 pounds more commercially grown vegetables than in 1970; 17 pounds more fruit; 11 pounds more caloric sweeteners; 37 pounds more poultry; 3 pounds more fish and shellfish (boneless, trimmed equivalent); 22 pounds more cheese; and 35 pounds more grain products.”³⁷ Together, all this food provides far more than the 1,900 kcal/day necessary to feed the average person (taking into account children and the elderly) and the 2,600 kcal/day scientists claim is an adequate buffer against weather, accidents, or other crises.³⁸ So what happens to the rest of the food—an average of 1,300 calories per person per day?

³⁴ Bloom (2010:95).

³⁵ Seachrist (2009)

³⁶ (Buzby et al. 2014:iii). Although the U.S. is the world's largest international trader in food, imports and exports roughly cancel each other out (Mena, Adenso-Diaz, and Yurt 2011:649).

³⁷ (Economic Research Service 2013).

³⁸ (Stuart 2009:174).

At least from freegans' vantage point, it looks like that food winds up ex-commodified: taken off the market and put in the dumpster. Indeed, since the 1970s, the proportion of the U.S. food supply going to waste has increased 50%.³⁹ The combination of commodification and over-production makes food waste inevitable—the only question is where and how it is going to happen. The hidden costs of our food system come not just in labor exploitation or ecological degradation in production, or obesity and other disease from food's consumption, but also the way much of that food never gets used at all.

Going Public with Waste: Food Not Bombs

We'll investigate the mechanics of this ex-commodification of food later. For now, though, it's enough to observe that there is a massive amount of excess food and that much of it is discarded because there's simply too much of it—not because it's actually bad. The over-abundance of food thus takes the form of ex-commodities which can be recovered by anyone who realizes it's out there. But how did activists come to see recovering this surplus food as a form of political action, rather than, say, a form of charity (as many food banks and pantries do) or barebones survivalism (our typical conception of “surplus food recovery” among the homeless and destitute)?

If there is one movement with an undeniable claim to a place in the genealogy of freeganism, it is Food Not Bombs (FNB). FNB was started in the 1980s in Boston by activists from the Clamshell Alliance, a movement which used non-violent civil disobedience to protest

³⁹ (Hall et al. 2009:1). Note, however, that this is a low estimate for the number of calories per day wasted in the U.S., because it excludes all waste before food reaches retailers and doesn't include food which could feed humans but is instead fed to animals, which convert it into a far-smaller number of calories in the form of meat.

the Seabrook nuclear power plant.⁴⁰ I spoke with one of FNB's founders, Keith McHenry, an affable lifelong activist with a Santa-Claus beard who has spent his life atoning for the actions of the U.S. military generals in his family, and who now lives in a yurt in New Mexico. As he explained it, at the time:

I was the produce manager at Bread and Circus, and they hired me because I was an expert in organics...I was throwing away so much great organic produce because it wasn't perfect, and the rich people who were going to spend that money wanted everything to look just right. And of course, in the apple department, it used to be just red delicious, but now you have all these exotic varieties and stuff.

So I started to take that produce that couldn't be sold down to a group of housing projects, and the people were super grateful. And so one day I asked them, 'What's that building across the street?' and they said, 'Something to do with nuclear weapons.' I looked into it, and I found out that they were designing guidance systems for ICBMs so they could hit towns over in the Soviet Union. So on one side of the road you had hungry people, and on the other side you had people making guidance systems.

The name "Food Not Bombs" stemmed from the absurd juxtaposition of hungry people living in poverty—their condition exacerbated by cut-backs to social services imposed by the Reagan administration, which claimed there weren't enough funds to go around—while huge amounts of money were funneled into the military-industrial complex.

FNB's first protest, he said, was organized to dramatize risky investments that the Bank of Boston was making in nuclear energy. McHenry and his activist friends concluded that the bank's investment "sounded a lot like the kind of stuff bankers were doing that led to the Great

⁴⁰ (Epstein 1991:Ch.2).

Depression,” and, to drive home the point, decided to dress up as hoboes and create an impromptu soup kitchen. The ingredients for the meal, McHenry said, were surplus that he took from the grocery store where he was working. As McHenry reflected, offering free food that would otherwise have gone to waste provided a provocation for people to think critically about the capitalist system:

The whole idea that food was free really blew people’s minds: the message that you could have as much as you want, because it was rescued, and that we didn’t anticipate or expect or even need money, and that—on top of that—it was great food which was well-presented. That had a profound impact on people, and that’s why we adopted that model permanently for FNB...It got people to think outside the box about all kinds of social and cultural issues. They started asking: ‘Why is food withheld from people who need it?

Why is food so expensive? And why is food a commodity when everyone needs it?’

FNB’s meals demonstrated that, if food currently going to waste were distributed fairly, the “scarcity” claimed as a justification for neo-liberalism would evaporate. More than just demonstrating this fact, though, McHenry and his friends actually *enacted* their vision for a post-capitalist food system by rescuing the use value of the food and distributing it without seeking exchange value in return. By McHenry’s own account, the combination of symbolic protest and direct action was wildly successful:

While we were handing out food, people were coming out of the [metro] station, and they started eating with us, stockholders, and business people, and the people from the [homeless] shelter. And they were all talking about the bank and its policies, and Seabrook, and the nuclear arms race. It was the best afternoon. That was March 26, 1981,

and afterward, we were cleaning up the pots and pans and we were talking like, ‘Let’s just quit our jobs and do nothing but this!’ And so I put in my two weeks notice.

In the late ‘80s, McHenry moved to San Francisco and started another FNB chapter. The San Francisco chapter was openly anarchist and frustrated even the city’s liberal mayor with its unwillingness to apply for permits or participate in the “negotiated management” that had been used to police protests since the 1960s.⁴¹ On August 15, 1988, forty-five officers in full riot gear arrested nine FNB activists; as the police spokesman explained, “This [the meal] appears to be more of a political statement than a program to feed the hungry.”⁴² In subsequent years, the struggle escalated, to the point where the *San Francisco Chronicle* asked every mayoral candidate in 1995 what they would do about Food Not Bombs. By that time, more than 1,000 activists had been arrested, the group had become the 4th-largest food service organization in San Francisco, and an offshoot, Homes Not Jails, had opened up hundreds of squats and was housing up to 500 homeless people a night.⁴³

FNB now claims affiliates in hundreds of cities worldwide,⁴⁴ but my own discussions with FNB activists suggest that FNB has become far less public and largely moved underground. Of course, the act of serving free food is not itself particularly “political”: after all, in many places soup kitchens and food pantries actually legitimate cut-backs to government services by providing a private band-aid that mitigates neo-liberalism’s worst effects.⁴⁵ FNB distinguishes itself by claiming that it is a prefigurative model for society: its chapters are run through

⁴¹ Parson (2010).

⁴² Qtd. in *ibid.*, 74.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁴ A listing of cities in which FNB has had chapters can be found at www.foodnotbombs.net, although many groups appear to be dormant.

⁴⁵ (Henderson 2004; Poppendieck 1999).

consensus decision making, it prepares only vegetarian meals, and those who eat are encouraged to share in the meal's preparation (and vice versa).

FNB activists see themselves as pushing back against the expanding reach of the market wrought by neo-liberalism by serving food to anyone who needs or wants it, offering “solidarity not charity” to the homeless and other precarious individuals whose very survival neo-liberalism has thrown into doubt. As Anne, one elderly participant I met through the FNB chapter in Berkeley, explained to me: “I think I speak for most if not all of us that the reason we are in Food Not Bombs and not some church or charity is because we believe that food is a human right and not a commodity. We demonstrate that by serving meals and giving away food.” Another activist explained the direct action logic behind the group in this way: “Radical is when you do something directly. There are lots of people who are very far left but who aren't radical, because they still try to work through the bureaucracy. They still ask people for what they need, rather than just taking it.”

Given their tactical affinities, it is no surprise that FNB has played an important role in some of the major mobilizations in which anarchists have been involved. According to one account, FNB “has served food at all the major demonstrations against neoliberalism...Many of the principal organizers in the movement against neoliberalism [the AGM] had their start as Food Not Bombs volunteers.”⁴⁶ Although the East Bay FNB group in Berkeley I spent the most time with started with a very specific goal—supporting protests against the first Gulf War in 1991—it has since moved away from public demonstrations and demands. As one of the group's pamphlets articulated:

⁴⁶ (Holtzman et al. 2007:52; see also Graeber 2009:236).

Voting, writing letters, marching and protesting, even using the judicial system, although necessary, hardly make an impact...Participating in the Food Not Bombs community is a meaningful and positive political act...It is by working today to create sustainable ways of living that prefigure the kind of society we want to live in that we build a vital and caring movement for social change. Food Not Bombs serves food as a practical act of sustaining people and organizations, not as symbolism.⁴⁷

When I asked Alan, a long-time activist who had been involved in East Bay FNB since the early 1990s, why the group didn't have a more overt and obvious message, he explained, "I used to try to bring out literature [on FNB] and do outreach. Try to get the message out. But then I realized: the food really *is* our message. That's the strongest message we can send."

Any given day of cooking and serving food with East Bay FNB provides ample opportunities to view how the group is imbricated with the myriad prefigurative projects and anarchist movements throughout the East Bay. On Fridays, the meal is prepared in the backyard of "Fort Awesome," a cooperative house replete with chicken coops, extensive organic gardens, and solar panels. On my first day, I met Manuel, an El Salvadorian immigrant who moved from Los Angeles to Oakland to participate in Occupy Oakland. Today, Manuel was serving as the "bottom-liner," the person taking responsibility for ensuring that the meal was ready on time. I asked him what I should do, and he replied, "That's not really how it works. You don't have to ask someone what to do; just do it." After a pause, he added, "It's a funny thing about hierarchy, that we're constantly trying to get rid of leadership but we always wind up turning to someone to tell us how we're supposed to act."

⁴⁷ (Gans and Karacas 2000:69, 2).

Manuel told me he was currently living in a squat and spending much of his time operating a free bike workshop in a low-income neighborhood. FNB was important to him not just as a way to express his politics to others, but also for his own survival: as he explained, “We’re all political in every part of our lives. But we also need some stability...and for that, you need a place to live, you need a reliable source of food. You have to create some kind of a structure.” The extent to which EBFNB fit into the broader anarchist community was evident from the number of projects—many of which taken under the auspices of Occupy Oakland—whose names followed the same wording as “Food Not Bombs”: “Coffee Not Cops,” “Homes Not Jails,” and “Food Not Lawns.” Each sought to take something these activists opposed and transform it, prefiguring the institutions of a post-capitalist society.

FNB’s prefigurative challenge to capitalism, of course, is dependent on capitalism itself, particularly the stream of ex-commodified food that capitalism seems to produce in nearly limitless quantities. Keith told me that the original idea of using food surpluses to make a political statement made sense within the budding practice of recovering waste among Boston anarchists in the early 1980s:

There was an entire culture around recovering things. At the same time, we were starting the punk movement, and I would write articles in local punk zines about all of this. So there was starting to be an ideology around recovering garbage and using it. It wasn’t about making money from it, but to use it as artwork and as props and as food, everything...There was a whole trend of recovering stuff that was very classically freegan, but we weren’t calling it freegan.

Although East Bay FNB has much of its food donated, thanks to the progressive culture of the Bay Area, the idea of recovering waste directly was undoubtedly part of activists’ toolkits. When

one popular tofu supplier announced it would stop donating its surplus to FNB, one cook reassured the group, “Don’t worry, we can still pick it up—we’ll just have to go out back to the dumpster and arrive a few hours later.” The activists even pay for rice and beans by collecting and re-selling abandoned furniture, gleaning the end of the year move-outs by students at the University of California, Berkeley, and selling it to thrift shops in San Francisco. And, at most meals, the group brings a “free box” with recovered items ranging from t-shirts to eight-tracks that anyone in attendance can take home.⁴⁸

The First Freegans and the “Ultimate Boycott”

In 1994, shortly after being released on bail before his trial for serving food in San Francisco without a permit, McHenry went on a “Rent Is Theft” speaking tour throughout the United States and Canada. After a presentation in Edmonton, he went with a group of local FNB “kids” who were in a punk band to a local health goods store. As he tells it:

At first, we went in, and they had samples everywhere, so we thought we could get breakfast by eating the samples. And we were all vegan, so we were just eating the vegan samples. But eventually, the workers said, ‘You’re just eating samples, you’re not even buying anything. You have to leave.’

McHenry, confident that any health food store was bound to have a plethora of ex-commodities on hand, suggested that the group go out back:

⁴⁸ Similarly, Giles (2013:199) found that, around the world, “This waste [is] the very stuff of Food Not Bombs. The food is donated or dumpster-dived. The spaces themselves are often squatted or located in shared houses on properties or in neighbourhoods [sic] whose value is marginal, and which have been, in a sense therefore, partially abandoned by the real-estate market. And the necessary equipment—kitchen implements, bikes, sometimes vehicles—are either scavenged, donated, or occasionally bought at low costs.”

There were these four massive dumpsters. There were a lot of us, maybe eight or nine people, and I was in a dumpster and discovered this huge wheel of imported cheese from France, priced at like \$250. It was covered in wax, and it hadn't even been cracked, and it was so huge that I couldn't even lift it up to the rim of the dumpster.

McHenry, like most people at FNB I interacted with, was vegan, but the top-notch cheese was too good to pass up: "I called out to everyone, 'I can't believe I just found this cheese. To heck with being vegan, let's be 'freegan'!' So that was it, where the word came from."

I have been unable to verify McHenry's story, despite trying to track down some of McHenry's other companions from that night. Nonetheless, his assertion that the term "freegan" appeared among anarchist circles in the 1990s as a way to describe vegans who would eat non-vegan food if it came from a dumpster checks out. All of the activists I have met who were dumpster-diving before the mid-90s told me that, when they started, they had never heard the term "freegan." The first reference to "freegans" available online is from 1997, and describes "freegans," roughly, as "vegans cheating on veganism with dumpstered food."⁴⁹ Consistent with this, one East Bay FNB activist noted that "most of my friends were vegan back then [in the 1990s], but sometimes they'd dumpster like non-vegan stuff and eat it, and they'd say they were 'freegan.'"

McHenry ultimately left the wheel of cheese in the dumpster, but he carried the tale of the legendary find with him. In Gainesville Florida, he told the "wheel of cheese" story at the Civic Media Center, an alternative community space. At that particular moment within the anarchist scene, he explained, "the whole energy that was going on made sense [with freeganism]," as more and more people were embracing waste recovery as one way to transform

⁴⁹ <http://coolbeans.com/cb8/amfinterview.htm>.

their lives and minimize their responsibility for capitalist exploitation. One attendee liked the word “freegan” enough to write a short manifesto entitled “Why Freegan?”⁵⁰ While McHenry originally used “freegan” to refer only to food, the tract offers a much broader vision:

There are two options for existence: 1) waste your life working to get money to buy things that you don’t need and help destroy the environment or 2) live a full satisfying life, occasionally scavenging or working your self-sufficiency skills to get the food and stuff you need to be content, while treading lightly on the earth, eliminating waste, and boycotting everything. Go!

Freegans, the author unsurprisingly declares, are those who choose the latter. Freeganism is the “ultimate boycott” directed against “EVERYTHING—All the corporations, all the stores, all the pesticides, all the land and resources wasted, the capitalist system, the all-oppressive dollar, the wage slavery, the whole burrito!” The pamphlet enumerates an array of strategies for “withdrawing from it [capitalism] and never using money” ranging from dumpster diving to politically-informed handkerchief use and skateboarding.

As should be clear by now, the idea of “withdrawing from” or “dropping out” of capitalism by appropriating its waste was nothing new, even if McHenry and the pamphlet he inspired gave it a catchy name. Running through the history of anarchist movements I’ve presented is a consistent tension between those who view “prefigurative politics” in terms of continued engagement with and challenge to mainstream society—albeit using organizing

⁵⁰ The author of the pamphlet is purported—according to Wikipedia—to be Warren Oakes, the former drummer of the punk band Against Me! (which formed in Gainesville, Florida in the late-’90s). I have attempted to confirm this but to no avail. Some of the band’s lyrics, though, have a freegan element: in “We Did It All For Don,” one verse exclaims: “We could live off of dumpsters if we have to / Sell our blood by the pint to make rent / This kind of dignity doesn’t come easy / But you’ll never find it for sale.”

strategies that are democratic and egalitarian—and those seeking to create alternative institutions or communities that are, as much as possible, *disengaged* from that society. Freeganism, as conceived by the unknown pamphleteer, was an extreme and individualistic version of the latter.

The freegan label quickly spread to anarchist circles throughout the U.S., Western Europe, and Australia. But the pamphlet was not proposing anything new: it was offering a name for things that people were already doing. Within the anarchist community, there was already a readily-identifiable group—the “travelers”—who set the “romantic standard for autonomous existence” by dumpster diving, hitchhiking, and refusing paid employment, “wishing to establish an existence outside the logic of capitalism.”⁵¹ One popular and off-referenced anarchist travelogue—*Evasion*—recounts the story of a young vegan cavorting across middle America, surviving by salvaging bagels and shoplifting. Although the book offers the occasional overt critique of mainstream culture, it primarily emphasizes a decadent counter-cultural lifestyle based around living off of waste:

Odd, it seemed, that dumpster diving was viewed as a habit of poverty, used as a last recourse of the desperate to provide just enough to scrape by. If people were starving or just scraping by on trash, they weren’t dumpster diving in my town. As a dumpster diver—with so much food, and the race to eat it all before spoilage—I’ve gained weight. It was, in fact, easier to get carried away with excessive materialistic pursuits than as a paying customer.⁵²

⁵¹ (Graeber 2009:248; see also Botha 2004; Halfacree 1996).

⁵² (Anon n.d.:69).

Proto-freegans like the author of *Evasion* often seem to be suspended in a world that lies “somewhere between economic necessity, cultural practice, and petty criminality.”⁵³ Despite this appearance, though, we should bear in mind that this “traveler” lifestyle is, at least to those who understand the anarchist prefigurative repertoire, a *political* act.⁵⁴

To offer another example, while many of the FNB volunteers in the Bay Area I talked to were already engaged in freegan practices, only once did someone identify himself to me as “freegan.” One day, I was chopping vegetables next to Jeff, a white male in his mid-twenties with massive black plugs gauging out his ears, nose and lip piercings, and a black tattoo sleeve up his right arm. He had moved to Oakland from Denver in order to study urban agriculture, and matter-of-factly stated that since he’d arrived, he’d lived on “no money,” adding, “I mean, I do work [referring to his activism with FNB and Occupy Oakland], I just don’t work for wages.” He said that he got almost all of his food from the dumpster, and proudly added, “My backpack, all my pens, my notebooks—I dumpstered all of them.” Squatting was another manifestation of his resource-recovery practices: “It’s all about taking something that’s being wasted and turning it into something useful. That’s what it’s all about. It’s like dumpstering a house.” When Jeff called himself “freegan,” Darrin—another FNB activist in his early forties, who has been homeless for most of his adult life due to his commitment to full-time, anarchist activism—asked, “What’s that?” When Jeff explained to him that “freeganism” meant trying to “drop out” of capitalism, Darrin nodded excitedly, and exclaimed, “That’s what I’ve been trying to do my whole life!” Darrin was, in effect, a long-time freegan without knowing it.

⁵³ (Ferrell 2006:9)

⁵⁴ Although, whether “lifestyle anarchism”—centered on individual strategies for living outside capitalism—is genuinely revolutionary is disputed within the anarchist community (Bookchin 2001).

The few available published studies of individuals outside of New York who identify themselves as “freegan” also find that freeganism is a diffuse subculture of youth committed to “dropping out” of capitalism. Edwards and Mercer describe a group of freegans and FNB participants in Australia, nearly all of whom are white, male, in their mid-twenties, and well-educated.⁵⁵ Reporting on a handful of freegans living in rural Oregon, Gross concludes that freegans are people who “prefer to opt out of the economic system entirely, living in the ‘cracks of society’ as they say, consuming only what society throws away.”⁵⁶ Her respondents are “not permanent residents” anywhere and are “not integrated into the community,” completely disconnected from the mainstream.⁵⁷ This juxtaposition between privileged upbringings and present-day scrounging for survival is not coincidental. As Clark writes of a group of dumpster divers in Seattle, “For those punks who were raised white or middle class, dumpsters and dumped food dirty their bodies and tarnish their affiliation with a white, bourgeois power structure. In this sense, the downward descent into a dumpster is literally an act of downward mobility.”⁵⁸ Freeganism, for these practitioners, was a kind of politicized voluntary poverty.

Beyond a basic agreement that freegan practice centered on reducing one’s participation in the capitalist economy through waste recovery, though, both published and un-published accounts of freeganism outside of freegan.info offer little sense of what the aim of freegans’ “politics” actually is. On one hand, some freegans argue that dumpster diving is itself a form of transformative direct action:

⁵⁵ (2007).

⁵⁶ (2009:69).

⁵⁷ (Gross 2009:61).

⁵⁸ (Clark 2004:28).

If shoppers all stopped buying stuff they don't need, and we started rummaging for our necessities through the stuff supermarkets throw away, the supermarkets themselves would soon stop over-ordering and stop budgeting in the immense waste that is a regular part of their economics.⁵⁹

Another laudatory account of freeganism argues that “the dumpster divers are the most logical subset of the anti-globalization activists because they live in a way that does not create any demand for goods and therefore their lives do nothing to propagate the very system they are protesting.”⁶⁰

For other freegans, however, living off of waste is not an end in itself, but a way to survive while engaging in more overtly political projects, whether it be setting up community bike workshops or protesting against the WTO. Some freegan.info participants even saw it this way. As Christian, a tall, handsome investment-banker-turned-sex-worker who was active with the group until 2008, explained to me at one of my first trash tours, “We’re activists. We’re working to save the rainforest. We’re fighting for human rights. This [dumpster diving] allows us to work less so that we have more time for activism.” One “how-to” zine for dumpster divers cautions that dumpster-diving is not an end in itself: “Dumpstering is a way of reducing your impact on the environment, but it is not a practice that works to directly engender a sustainable world. THAT is a topic for another zine.”⁶¹

In short, freeganism started as just a word, upon which a range of people and groups—including freegan.info—have since ascribed their own meanings. Freeganism as a whole is not really a “movement,” at least not in the sociological sense of “collective action by people with

⁵⁹ (Anon n.d.:53).

⁶⁰ (Essig 2002).

⁶¹ (Benji and Kaylan n.d.:1).

common purposes and solidarity.”⁶² As Keith McHenry reflected to me, seventeen years after he coined the term:

It started as a joke, really. I had just been thinking: isn't it amazing that there's this \$250 wheel of cheese here?... We were vegan and we found a lifetime supply of cheese. At that point, it had nothing to do with a movement or anything like that, just a really funny thing that happened. It was the young man that wrote the flyer [*Why Freegan?*] who made it into a theory. But my sense from that flyer is that it was also supposed to be more humorous and playful.⁶³ He hit upon something that was already happening for many years. It was just that one guy writing about it, not a deliberate attempt to make a movement or to have it be worldwide.

During my time with East Bay FNB activists, I encountered several who were engaged in what could be called “freeganism”—which is to say, they were meeting most of their needs through recovering waste, rather than engaging in wage labor to purchase commodities. To them, it was obvious to use ex-commodities to reduce their participation in the capitalist economy. But when I mentioned my time spent with an organized group of freegans in New York at one meal in Berkeley, Manuel looked at me incredulously: “Wait, it's like a *movement* there?”

⁶² (Loveman 1998:479). As Tilly (1978:203) elaborates, “retreatist groups seeking total withdrawal from contemporary life do not fully qualify” as “political” because “in principle they can prosper as long as the rest of the world lets them alone.”

⁶³ The fact that the flyer is “humorous and playful” is evident in its suggestion that drinking one's own urine is a freegan practice. At the same time, as Graeber (2009) argues, “play” and “politics” are not mutually exclusive: in fact, prefigurative politics is, in essence, a form of playful experimentation in alternative ways of life and social organization.

Garbage in Gotham⁶⁴

So why did freeganism take such a particular form in New York? Of course, if freegans are right that capitalism as a whole is wasteful, the logical corollary is that acquiring food by dumpster diving should be possible just about anywhere in the United States (or, indeed, the Western world). As the author of *Evasion* reports, “There was always the consistent and confounding thread running through each town and region in America: edible trash.”⁶⁵ Adam himself insists that it’s possible to dumpster dive “everywhere”—at least within the range of his travels (not surprisingly, he avoids flying)—although it’s a bit more “hit or miss” in the suburbs. Scholars have confirmed the apparent universality of available wasted food with accounts of self-identified freegans and dumpster-divers in a range of urban, suburban, and rural contexts.⁶⁶

But while the existence of ex-commodities might be a universal fact of modern capitalism, the municipal garbage-governance systems that manage waste vary from country to country and city to city.⁶⁷ The dumpster-diving expeditions I have taken outside New York hardly allow for systematic comparison, but they do hint at the variation in what “dumpster diving” actually entails. I took one foraging trip in Phoenix, Arizona with a middle-aged, otherwise inconspicuous woman who claimed she had recovered and redistributed tens of thousands of dollars of food in the previous few years under the *nom-de-guerre*, “Ginger

⁶⁴ Thanks to Professor Robin Nagle of New York University for the cleverly alliterative title.

⁶⁵ (Anon n.d.:25).

⁶⁶ Various accounts of dumpster diving for food can be found, in the U.S., for rural Oregon (Gross 2009), suburban Illinois (More 2011), Texas (Ferrell 2006), and Kansas (Vaughn 2011) and urban Seattle (Darrell 2009; Giles 2013) and New York (Botha 2004; Lindeman 2012). Academics have studied dumpster diving for food outside the U.S. in Australia (Edwards and Mercer 2007; Rush 2006), Canada (Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013), France and Italy (Black 2007; Mourad 2012), the Netherlands (de Vries and Abrahamsson 2012), New Zealand (Fernandez et al. 2011), Spain (Lotman 2013), and the United Kingdom (Pandeli 2011; Thomas 2010).

⁶⁷ (see Bulkeley, Watson, and Hudson 2007; Crang et al. 2013; Davies 2008).

Freebird.” The take was abundant, but the logistics complicated: in a city built for automobiles, a car was a necessity. Moreover, the desert heat meant that food spoiled rapidly. Worse still, many of the scalding-hot dumpsters we visited were full of non-food detritus discarded by people looking to avoid the city’s waste-disposal fees.

I tried my hand dumpster diving in Europe, following the city-by-city guide posted on the open-source encyclopedia, “trashwiki.org.” In Montpellier and Paris, France, there were fewer donuts and more cheese and yogurt than in the U.S. Most French grocery stores had compactors, though, so in the few places where the food was accessible it was gone in a few minutes, harvested more often than not by elderly women continuing the long French tradition of “gleaning” excess food.⁶⁸ In Vienna, Austria, food waste was locked-away in indoor “trash-rooms” with a nausea-inducing smell that made any trip there a short one. The local anarchist community had stolen a master key from the city’s sanitation service and distributed copies but, when I visited, they were concerned that the municipality was in the process of changing the locks. Freegans may be correct when they point out that virtually wherever there are supermarkets, there is wasted food. But accessing that food presents unique challenges depending on the location.

For its part, New York has always been “too large and too densely populated to be typical”⁶⁹ in its municipal waste system. The City’s “Commissioner’s Plan of 1811,” which laid down its iconic numbered grid, left no space for alleyways.⁷⁰ As such, “dumpster diving” in New York entails no dumpsters: garbage is instead bagged-up and put directly on the street. This seemingly minor detail is a piece of waste-recovery folklore. At one FNB meal, Roots—an

⁶⁸ For a discussion of “gleaning” in France and Italy, see (Black 2007)

⁶⁹ (Strasser 1999:125)

⁷⁰ (Nagle 2013:96).

African American community-garden activist—explained: “New York was built before cars. So there’s no space to put trash away from the curb, so there are no dumpsters.”

New York’s (non)dumpster divers thus do their foraging on well-lit streets, where they can easily access and examine garbage for useful items, rather than in dark back-alleys. One seasoned dumpster diver involved in freegan.info observed, “New York is very specific because they put the garbage directly on the sidewalk. That makes it very easy [to dumpster dive], and I can’t think of anywhere else in the world like that.” Another freegan.info activist, Leia (who we’ll meet later), compared the public character of dumpster dives in New York to more private expeditions in her previous home, Minnesota: “There, it’s a lot more just between you and the food. The dumpsters are in alleyways, not the sidewalk, so you really can’t make it public.”

The rudimentary manner in which trash collection happens in New York—bags have to be physically lifted into the truck—also means that trash has to be collected every day. As a result, freegans can be confident that trash on the curb has been there for a few hours at most—leaving less time for rats or cockroaches to reach it. Comparing dumpster diving in New York to her native France, Marie explained, “There [in France], I need help just to pass the bags over the rim [of the dumpster]. You need more planning, more organization. Here, if I want to get a donut, I can just go out at any time and I know it’ll be here. The garbage here is very reliable.” The “urban ecology”⁷¹ of New York facilitates recovering wasted food in other ways as well. The city’s density means that there are an exceptional number of places that serve food—24,000 restaurants, 5,445 supermarkets and grocers, 1,700 wholesalers, and 1,000 food manufacturers⁷²—that produce salvageable waste in a relatively small area.

⁷¹ (Park and Burgess 1968).

⁷² (Brannen 2010:3).

Although “theft of garbage” and “interfering with sanitation” operations are crimes in New York,⁷³ two scholars who studied scavengers in the city could not find a single example of someone being ticketed for gathering food or other items from the trash.⁷⁴ Adam has only interacted with the police once during his thirteen years of dumpster diving in the city—and in that case, the officer simply stopped to ask, “Finding anything good?” Once again, the contrast with dumpster divers I spoke to outside New York—who often faced locked gates barring them from dumpsters and feared being caught trespassing on store property—was stark.⁷⁵ Bemoaned one freegan in South Dakota:

They put their dumpsters out there—Wal-Mart and Sam’s Club—they both have three big dumpsters that have labels on them saying ‘organic products only’. But they light them up and put security cameras on them right next to the street...It’s like, ‘Okay, we’re throwing this good stuff away, but you can’t have it, nyah nyah nyah.’

One frustrated Danish diver shared her own war-stories over the freegan-world e-mail list: “I am very proud to be a forager but we have problems here in Scandinavia. We must constantly watch for the police because if we are seen to be foraging in a dumpster, the fine is 500 kroner.

⁷³ New York Administrative Code, Title 16, Section 7(b) states “No person, other than an authorized employee or agent of the department shall disturb or remove any ashes, garbage, or light refuse or rubbish placed by householders, or their tenants, or by occupants or their servants, within the stoop or area line, or in front of houses or lots, for removal, unless requested by residents of such houses.” Adam claims, however, that the Supreme Court’s 1988 ruling in *California v. Greenwood* permits scavenging on public property (see Rathje and Murphy 1992:23).

⁷⁴ (Botha 2004; Duneier 1999).

⁷⁵ According to Vaughn (2011:39), one Kansas diver had been arrested, charged with burglary, paid hundreds in fines, and completed community service for dumpster diving.

Sometimes ‘good citizens’ use their cell phones to phone the police.” In New Zealand, “doing the duck”—that is, kiwi for dumpster diving—is flatly illegal.⁷⁶

The comparatively easy, abundant, and legal dumpster diving in New York has earned it a reputation as a forager’s mecca. One day, while I was preparing a meal with Food Not Bombs in Berkeley, California, I spoke about my experiences with freegan.info in New York. Anka, a German *émigré* with long dreadlocks, chimed in: “Yeah, I couldn’t believe how much food there was everywhere I looked in New York!” When I mentioned that freegan.info held public dives in the city, Anka replied, “Well, I guess you could try to do a public thing here [in San Francisco]. But most of the grocery stores here are already donating their food. So there’s not that many places to go here, and they’re pretty spread out.” As one reporter studying scavengers concluded, “New York can’t be beat. The combination of wealth, residents living at close quarters, and the fact that so much gets thrown away out of lack of space, sheer laziness, ignorance, and wastefulness means there’s lots of [waste] and it’s easy to reach.”⁷⁷

New York’s waste is more than just physically accessible, however: the city also has arguably “the country’s most political garbage.”⁷⁸ In the 19th century, waste reclamation provided a lucrative source of patronage jobs for government and political party elites; by some accounts, the riots that swept the city in 1863 were spurred partly by cuts to employment in sanitation services.⁷⁹ In the 1970s, New York’s overflowing Fresh Kills landfill became a symbol of a perceived national “garbage crisis,” in which waste was threatening to escape the

⁷⁶ Fernandez et al. (2011).

⁷⁷ (Botha 2004:4).

⁷⁸ (Kelly 1973:158).

⁷⁹ (Nagle 2013:144; Rogers 2005:48).

marginal spaces to which it had been relegated.⁸⁰ The Mobro 4000—a barge filled with over 3,000 tons of New York’s trash—made national headlines in 1987 when it cruised down the east coast of the United States and all the way to Belize searching for a community in which it could dump its cargo.⁸¹ A public sense that garbage was a “problem” that required political action was on display in 1995 and 2002 as well, when Mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg had to backtrack on attempts to cut or reduce recycling services after public outcry.⁸²

Nonetheless, despite 2,023 sanitation trucks picking up more than 11,000 tons of trash a day,⁸³ New York’s municipal sanitation system often appears on the edge of bursting at the seams. New York has “never found a satisfactory way of handling its waste”⁸⁴ and the city ranks near the bottom of rankings for the effectiveness of municipal waste management, recycling a mere 15% of its garbage.⁸⁵ There is a clear tension in a city that produces waste in exceptional quantities and a waste removal system that is particularly unsophisticated and unsuccessful in keeping the ex-commodities within that waste stream hidden.

Academics are always tempted to offer convoluted explanations for simple things. Occam’s razor might suggest that freegan.info emerged in New York because that’s where its founders—Adam and Wendy—happened to be. But particular features of the way garbage flows through America’s largest metropolis made it a particularly hospitable spot for freeganism. Little

⁸⁰ (Kelly 1973:157).

⁸¹ In truth, the infamous “gar-barge” incident occurred not for lack of landfill space, but because its owner failed to get the requisite permissions from the town where he hoped to dump it (Rathje and Murphy 1992:241). The whole idea of a national “garbage crisis” has subsequently faded: the U.S. still has ample space for landfills, even if the ecological consequences of continuing to fill them are grave.

⁸² (MacBride 2012:41; Miller 2000:266).

⁸³ (Department of Sanitation 2013).

⁸⁴ (Gandy 2002:190).

⁸⁵ (Navarro 2011). By comparison, the figure for San Francisco is 80% although this partly reflects accounting differences (MacBride 2013)

surprise, then, that the “garbage capital of the world”⁸⁶—a city literally built on top of trash⁸⁷—would play host to the most visible freegan group critiquing and recovering that waste: freegan.info.

Freegan.info’s Wetland Birth

The story of freegan.info itself starts with Wetlands Night Club, lovingly remembered as a “hippie dive bar” that opened in a post-industrial district of Tribeca, Manhattan in 1989.⁸⁸ In one documentary, patrons described it as “a beautiful flower growing in a crack in the concrete” or “a secret society, a temporary autonomous zone, a late-night slacker’s sanctuary, a tripper’s refuge, an all-ages hardcore haven”—terms that evoked the prefigurative radical communities to which the club was closely connected. Wetlands’ owners billed it as an “environmental nightclub,” offering only paper straws with its drinks and matchbooks made from recycled materials. A hub for the “jam band” scene, Wetlands eschewed the corporate sponsorships that were then becoming more and more prevalent in alternative music. Perhaps most importantly, the club channeled its patrons towards activism through benefit concerts and weekly “Eco-Saloons.” It even included in its operating budget up to \$100,000 a year for an environmental and social justice center.

Although the club itself closed in October 2001—replaced with loft apartments as part of the ongoing gentrification of lower Manhattan—the Wetlands Activism Collective (WAC) continued. According to its website, the WAC is a “volunteer-run grassroots organization” which

⁸⁶ (Kelly 1973:149).

⁸⁷ Once source suggests that 1/3rd of lower Manhattan is built on former waterways that were filled in with garbage (Botha 2004:55).

⁸⁸ The fact that, at the time, “there was nothing down there [in Tribeca] back then” (Budnick 2008)—making the district virtually “wasted”—helps explain why Wetlands was able to survive so long with an unconventional business model.

is “focused on resisting global capitalism and its devastating effect on the environment and the lives of human and nonhuman animals.”⁸⁹ The collective’s stated commitment to “draw[ing] connections between animal rights, human rights, and environmental concerns” and opposition to “the commodification of life on all fronts” is similar to the anti-capitalist critiques on freegan.info’s website—hardly a coincidence, given that both were primarily penned by Adam. Adam first went to Wetlands in the mid-1990s for a talk on the damage that oil exploitation was causing to the environment and indigenous peoples in Ecuador.⁹⁰ Adam eventually became the collective’s activism director and was a key force in keeping the WAC going when the club closed.

In the 1990s, Wetlands was at the vanguard of creating New York’s direct action scene. As Cindy, a freegan.info activist who had been involved with Wetlands, explained:

Wetlands was always kind of its own isolated thing, in that we were doing environmental stuff when really very few grassroots groups in the city were... When I was first involved in ’95 and ’96, I didn’t see lots of other [direct action] activism going on in the city, maybe some community gardening and that was it. So we were active kind of before it was mainstream or in the news.

WAC organized events on behalf of Earth First! and the Rainforest Action Network, two environmentally-focused anarchist groups that used direct actions—such as “spiking” trees to make them dangerous to cut or blockading logging trucks—to protect old-growth forests in the

⁸⁹ wetlands-preserve.org/

⁹⁰ For more information on the atrocities committed by the oil industry in Ecuador, see Kilmerling (1991).

tropics and Northwestern United States.⁹¹ For its part, Wetlands mixed direct action with more classic social movement tactics that ranged from street theatre to civil disobedience to lobbying. Its website lists a huge number of campaigns—and victories—that usually involved pressuring corporations around issues of animal abuse, workers’ rights, or their purchasing of environmentally-unsustainable products.⁹²

Adam told me that, at an animal rights conference in Seattle in 1995—around the time McHenry was traveling around sharing the story of the wheel of cheese—he described his lifestyle to another activist, who told him that he was a “freegan.” At the time, though, Adam was taken aback: “I saw a freegan as someone who’s usually vegan, but then someone gives her half a ham sandwich, and since she didn’t pay for it, says it’s ‘freegan’ and eats it.”

As the definition of freeganism circulating within the anarchist scene broadened into the “total boycott” described by the *Why Freegan?* pamphlet, though, the term gained in allure. The people involved in the WAC—like Wendy, Cindy, and Adam—were becoming frustrated with trying to boycott exploitative companies individually. The official freegan.info story encapsulates this realization:

After years of trying to boycott products from unethical corporations responsible for human rights violations, environmental destruction, and animal abuse, many of us found that no matter what we bought we ended up supporting something deplorable. We came to realize that the problem isn’t just a few bad corporations but the entire system itself.⁹³

⁹¹ (see London 1998; Manes 1990; Williams 2009). Even more extreme offshoots of these groups, such as the Earth Liberation Front, took direct action to the next level by engaging in more overt property destruction to prevent environmental degradation (Beck 2007).

⁹² http://wetlands-preserve.org/no_count.php?page=PastCampaigns

⁹³ freegan.info/

This sense of the need for a wholesale challenge to capitalism, in line with Wetlands' ecological ideals, drew them to freeganism, which seemed like an effective way to get beyond the limits of Wetlands' previous campaigns.

According to Cindy, at one point while the club was still open, Wetlands screened a documentary about waste. Afterward, some of the WAC activists—who were already dumpster diving to feed themselves—led a group dumpster dive. She herself remembers being surprised to learn “that you could get good, healthy stuff from the garbage, not just cake.” The surprising number of attendees “planted a seed that this [recovering waste] was something that people were interested in.” Wendy and Adam worked together to create the freegan.info website as a side project of Wetlands in 2003, and Wendy formed a group on the social network “meet-up” around the same time. In 2005 the group began offering a monthly calendar of events, including skill shares, films and forums, and, of course, collective dumpster dives or “trash tours.”

Anarchism in its DNA

The essays on the freegan.info website are the closest thing the group has to any formal statement of mission or strategy, and provide a glimpse into the group's founding political rationality. At least at its inception, the vision was a prefigurative one:

Freegans envision a future based on self-sufficient, sustainable communities, where we obtain vital resources in ways that don't exploit people, animals, or the earth, and share them freely to ensure that everyone's needs are met. We believe the best way to shape this future is to put these values into practice today to the greatest extent possible.

The post-capitalist future the group espouses, too, is more in keeping with that of contemporary anarchists than old-school socialists or communists. As the website avers, “To live in harmony

with other beings and our planet...we must decrease personal and societal consumption, shrinking our personal and societal economic needs.”⁹⁴

In stark contrast to the forms of freeganism I described before, however, freegan.info intended to present freeganism as more than just a dropout subculture or individualistic lifestyle. In fact, the website—that is to say, Adam—is disdainful of a single-minded focus on achieving ecological and ethical perfection in personal practices:

Freeganism is NOT a form of asceticism or purism. Freegans recognize that the society we live in makes us all complicit in social and environmental atrocities—a simple act like flipping on the lights means contributing to global warming and habitat destruction through strip mining of coal. Our goal is to present PRACTICAL alternatives that massive numbers of people can use to make their lives easier and better while limiting their economic support for oppressive corporate practices. Freegans believe that our economic system and social structure as a whole needs to change—not just individual practices—and believe that by creating more humane and sustainable living strategies and building institutions to facilitate them, we can make corporate dominated global capitalism obsolete.

Even as the website fingers individual consumers—not just corporations or capitalists—as responsible for “social and environmental atrocities,” it suggests that any strategy to address those atrocities must be a collective one.

Freegan.info’s ancestry is visible in the group’s structure, which closely mirrors that of other anarchist groups but which strays far from what most people would see as “organization.”⁹⁵

⁹⁴ <http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-philosophy/destructive-consumer-products-boycotts-and-responsible-shopping/>

The group has no formal membership requirements, no offices or titles, and only a handful of collectively articulated policies. Meetings are led by a rotating facilitator, and decisions are made by consensus: anyone who has attended two meetings and done “some work”—the precise meaning of this requirement is unclear, although it is certainly not stringent—can block any proposal for any reason (although, a single block can eventually be overruled). Most decisions are carried out by semi-autonomous, voluntary “working groups,”⁹⁶ which, like the umbrella group, have no defined or fixed structure.

Some individuals who came to freegan.info meetings unfamiliar with this anarchist version of direct democracy and non-hierarchical organization told me that they appreciated how open the group was to newcomers; others, confronting the Byzantine complexity of getting work done under this system, described freegan.info to me as “bureaucratic.” Either way, freegan.info was copying organizational forms that were widely diffused by the direct action movements of the 1980s and 90s. Many of the hand signals I saw used in freegan.info meetings—“twinkle” fingers to show approval, or crossed arms for a “block”—were later icons of the General Assemblies of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

While the freegans certainly seek to expand participation in their movement—“I want someone in every city saying they’re a freegan, saying ‘fuck capitalism’,” as Madeline put it—freegan.info’s participants have a very particular idea of what “growing the movement” means. When I first attended a freegan trash tour and indicated I was from New Jersey, Janet suggested to me that I stop coming to New York and bring the freegan movement to my hometown. When

⁹⁵ (see, e.g., Epstein 1991; Graeber 2009; Juris 2008).

⁹⁶ The working groups of freegan.info are constantly shifting and often are composed of just a single person. At the group’s height in 2009, freegan.info had working groups for strategic planning, the bike workshop, films and forums, calendar preparation, media, the office, and the website.

interest in freegan.info peaked in 2008, the group floated the idea of freegan.info “chapters” in other cities. The “guidelines” the group proposed would allow virtually any group that claimed to be pro-sustainability and anti-consumption to have access to the group’s website, e-mail lists, press contacts, and printed materials. Jason explained the logic behind chapters in these terms:

Trying to traverse great distances to bring our mission to everyone just will just wear us out. We should give our ideas and our structure to other localities, and let them apply them to make their own groups. I can even envision a point where there are self-contained freegan groups in every borough of New York. How cool would that be?

Just because we have a lot of people volunteering, that doesn't mean we have to spill it over into more stuff. Then if the participation gets too high, we should encourage another chapter to split off and do its own thing. The ‘chapters’ concept is very important. You don’t spread ideas over a massive population by growing your organization to a massive size, you spread them by birthing offshoots.

The e-mail that announced the new guidelines for chapters stated, “We claim no ownership of freeganism, but hope to build the resources and mission of freegan.info as part of a global collective effort.” Although the group *does* have “chapters” in Washington D.C. and Boston, there is virtually no coordination between them.

If its organizational structure and prefigurative focus was what freegan.info shared with other movements, its emphasis on waste was what distinguished it. Although the freegan.info home page lists strategies like urban gardening, wild food foraging, and voluntary unemployment as freegan practices, “waste reclamation” comes first. The first image that confronts a visitor to the site is a picture of a woman leaning out of a dumpster, holding a bag of presumably just-rescued potatoes. While FNB and the other anarchist groups described

previously had considered waste as one possible resource for prefigurative practice, freegan.info made it central, stating that:

Through dumpster diving, squatting, guerilla gardening and other strategies, freegans transform waste into resources to meet real needs, allowing us to live our values of ecological sustainability, cooperation, and sharing while reducing our contribution to capitalism's abuse of humans, animals and the earth.

Dumpster diving, the opening essay on the website goes on to state, is a way to “*politically* challenge the injustice of allowing vital resources to be wasted”—not just a way to reduce one's individual ecological footprint. Although Adam invariably talks about dumpster diving in deprecating terms, describing it as “being a bottom feeder off of capitalism,” it is hard not to get the impression from the website he largely wrote that collective dumpster diving is *the* defining tactic in freegan.info's political arsenal.

Strident rhetoric about freegan.info as “revolutionary movement” building a “global counter-economy to capitalism” aside, both Wendy and Adam concur that the group's first organized “trash tour” did not go well. Adam bickered with one other WAC activist over whether the tour was about the “politics of dumpster diving” or simply a social event for people who usually dived individually. The grocery stores they visited hadn't put out food that night, contributing to the fracas. Wendy and Adam also agree that the handful of attendees at that event were already at the radical fringes, well-versed in prefigurative politics. To their surprise, though, freegan.info's next few dives began to attract people from outside New York's relatively narrow direct action scene—suggesting that freeganism had appeal beyond its anarchist roots.

II: UNVEILING THE FETISH OF WASTE: THE POLITICS OF FREEGANISM

3. Diving In: Becoming Freegan

Like most freegans I interviewed, Madeline described herself as having come from a “safe, happy, and decidedly normal” suburban, middle-class household. She nonetheless insisted that inspirations for her later political behavior were presented to her early: her parents were depression babies who “grew up with frugality.” Madeline recalled that her grandparents cultivated a vegetable garden, preserved food, knit and sewed their own clothes, and repaired broken household items rather than buying new ones—all activities that she now sees as having deeply political significance. She remembered an ethic of non-wasting that pervaded her household, and, reflecting on her own vision for a utopian future, told me, “I look at my grandmother’s generation, and I think ‘not so bad’. They were reusing, they were repairing, they were composting, and they weren’t consuming as a form of entertainment.”

Madeline’s introduction to more overt political radicalism came in the late 1970s at State University of New York, Stony Brook, where she studied theater. College for her was a time of emergent awareness: her neighbors across the hall in her dorm were anarchists, and, as she became cognizant of her own bisexuality, she was exposed to gay-rights activism. She dropped out of college after a year-and-a-half, intent on pursuing an acting career on her own. When she found few opportunities in her chosen profession, though, she moved to the countryside and started learning about “survival living,” cutting her own firewood, trapping animals for meat, and canning food from her garden. She proudly told me that by this point she had almost completely withdrawn from the monetary economy: “freegan,” perhaps, without having ever heard the word.

While she found the ethical purity of her rural lifestyle appealing, though, a year of relative isolation found her longing for more engagement. She took a tour of back-to-the-land communities scattered across the United States and eventually settled in Bellingham, Washington. There, Madeline told me, she worked at a vegetarian restaurant, operated an alternative printing press, and helped to found a shelter for victims of domestic violence. Her interest in art and activism converged when she discovered “Situationism,” a philosophy propounded in 1960s France whose practitioners tried to subvert capitalism in everyday life.¹ Situationism led her to challenge the dominant norms and symbols of society in unconventional ways, like street theater or graffiti.

Her participation in the cultural politics of post-1960s America, though, eventually brought her into conflict with the state. She and her partner were held for two weeks after an anti-nuclear protest, but eventually let out. Later, she was caught spray-painting and charged with a felony—a moment that she recalls as a major turning point:

While I was in jail, my Situationist friends started organizing on my behalf. They wanted to turn me into a ‘poster girl’ for the cause, making my story into a parable for free speech versus police repression. But I didn’t feel comfortable with being reduced to a set of characteristics designed to fit the typecast profile of a political prisoner.

Madeline, then nearly thirty years old, pled guilty to a misdemeanor and, in her words, simply “backed off.” She returned to school at Western Washington University and finished her degree in theater. Shortly thereafter, though, she abandoned the stage: “I just got too tired of being poor,” she explained. For the first time in years, she took a full-time job.

¹ (see Debord 2000).

As she describes it, the next two decades of her life were a “slippery slope” that carried her steadily further and further away from political engagement. She returned to New York, covered up the gaps in her resume, and entered the finance world. To her surprise, she ascended the ranks quickly; even without previous experience in business, “I just proved to be good at climbing the corporate ladder. I played it like a video game.” When she moved to the communications department at Barnes & Noble a few years later, her salary topped six-figures, paying for what she dubbed a “dream life.” Looking back, she admitted, “I had been bought off. I had been co-opted. And it felt good.” Madeline went to anti-Gulf War protests in 1991, but for over ten years thereafter, she was by her own admission “no longer politically involved.” When the second Bush Administration invaded Iraq, she said she was disturbed—but inactive.

Things changed only when she read about “Reverend Billy and the Church of Life After Shopping,” a street theater troupe based in New York dedicated to convincing people to limit their consumption. When I spoke to Reverend Billy, he described the tactics of his combination ministry-theatre troupe—performing exorcisms on banks and beatifying anti-waste activists—as “Trying to turn society upside down. Change the signals. Drive people out of their old understandings.” This blend of politics and performance, social change and everyday life, resonated with Madeline and her Situationist past. Later that year, she risked arrest by doubling for Reverend Billy at a civil disobedience action on “Buy Nothing Day” 2004. Her sudden reintegration into political activism was, to her, “like living under water for ten years and then sticking my head up and breathing.”

By Madeline’s account, she then entered into an intense period of personal change and self-exploration. Surfing the web and following links from one activist website to another, she encountered freegan.info, which caught her attention as a more radical version of the Church of

Stop Shopping. Out of curiosity, she attended a first meeting. The experience was, she laughed, “horrendous”: the group at that time appeared to lack any organization or direction, and the meeting consisted of little more than an ideological shouting match between Adam and Wendy.

However, something about the trash tour afterward “clicked.” When I pressed her to explain why, she replied, “There was just something about the hidden part of waste. Seeing all that food—it was like a microcosm of what is wrong with capitalism.” In a sense, the collective dumpster dive appealed to her for the same reasons articulated by Jason and Wendy: it dispelled the fetishism of waste—the fact, usually hidden from sight, that much of what gets produced is wasted, and that much of that waste, far from being polluted and valueless, is still useful. And, she quickly realized, the experience was not just powerful for her: “I like watching other people have their ‘Aha’ moments—realizing that there’s all this waste out there, and connecting it to capitalism.” As she mused, “There’s this whole opportunity for more activities than you could ever do in New York City. So I guess it’s significant that I stayed with the freegans.”

Within the space of a year, Madeline had quit her job, left her Manhattan apartment in a doorman building in favor of a small but tidy flat she and her partner purchased in Flatbush, Brooklyn, and dedicated all of her time to political work. She became one of freegan.info’s chief spokespeople, putting her skills in corporate communication to work in honing an anti-capitalist message centered on waste. When I spoke again with Madeline in 2011, she told me about her recent work to save a community garden and her deepening involvement in projects to protect food crops’ genetic diversity from control by international agribusiness. She also reported that she had recently been arrested at an Occupy Wall Street protest for raucously banging a pot and pan in a police officer’s face. This time, though, she was not backing off her activism, but suing the NYPD for wrongful arrest.

While Madeline's switch from corporate success-story to full-time activist makes for a dramatic story—it even earned her a chapter in a book about life “U-turns”²—it is more intelligible within her own history of political engagement. Madeline got her activist start in the culture- and identity-focused movements of post-1960s America, but eventually came to doubt their efficacy. When she returned to activism, she found a movement that built on the brand of politics she knew—theatrical protest with emphasis on personal consumption and everyday life—but which tied these tactics to more direct and material attacks on capitalism. Her narrative highlights how, for individuals with the right set of experiences and predispositions, the mere act of seeing the scale of ex-commodities—peering past the fetishism that obscures our waste—can be a powerful and life-changing experience.

Freegan From Birth?

Twenty out of twenty-two freegan.info participants I interviewed reported that they came from “middle class,” “upper-middle class,” or “privileged” backgrounds.³ This finding is consistent with numerous studies on post-1960s leftist movements, which observe that participants are generally economically secure and well educated.⁴ Most freegans are childless, college-educated, and unmarried: all features of what sociologist Doug McAdam calls “biographical availability” for activism.⁵ Freegans themselves, though, viewed their backgrounds

² (Grierson 2007).

³ This contrasts with Nguyen et al. (2013), who found that many freegans were from lower or middle class backgrounds. However, their definition of “freeganism” includes people diving for non-political reasons, which may help explain the discrepancy.

⁴ (Eder 1990; Jasper and Nelkin 1992; Offe 1985). Although Graeber (2009:246) disputes the common trope that the participants in modern anarchist movements are primarily from privileged backgrounds.

⁵ (1986).

as more than just a set of demographic prerequisites. In fact, nearly every freegan I interviewed tied his or her present activism to experiences, emotions, and aspirations from childhood.

Radicalization: Political Models from Parents and Grandparents

Three of my interviewees insisted that anti-capitalist politics were imparted to them by their parents. One anonymous freegan explained that her family life inculcated in her a “daily consciousness about how my actions affected other elements of the world.” As such, there was no moment when she decided to become an activist: instead, she had *always* operated on the assumption that she would be politically engaged. The only question was which cause would occupy her time: in her youth, she switched between work on behalf of Palestinians, political prisoners, or third-world victims of corporate globalization. Her commitments were tied to a strong sense of moral obligation, rather than any reassuring sense that social transformation was likely to come during her lifetime. “My grandfather used to talk about the Spanish Revolution,” she said, “and he always told me, ‘You don’t fight fascism because you think you can win. You fight it because it’s *fascism*.’”

Lola, a tattooed young woman with a septum piercing and a short Mohawk, who participated in freegan.info events during the summer of 2008 while she was traveling across the country by bicycle, train-hopping, and hitch-hiking, presented a similar narrative. Her parents were academics, and she grew up hearing about the historical injustices of the U.S. government against Native Americans and other minorities. More than just hearing about these wrongs, though, she was actively exposed to them: she recalled, for example, that when she was just a few years old her parents took her to rallies on behalf of migrant farmworkers striking for higher wages.

Disillusioned with the public school system, her parents pulled her out in fifth grade: “They basically thought that the child has the best idea of what to learn. So I just would go to the library every day and find topics that were interesting to me.” When she returned to public school in 10th grade, she was already heavily involved in social movement organizing. She protested against labor practices in Taco Bell and sweatshop conditions in Nike factories—trying, with no avail, to get her peers at school to join her in sit-ins and confrontational protests. “It’s hard to get high school students interested in direct action,” she admitted.

Leia—a Latina in her mid-20s, and one of the few participants in freegan.info with a child, a toddler named Uma—also attributed her political commitments to early experiences. Her father and grandfather, she explained, were “anti-Christian” and had “communistic leanings.” Leia’s family moved from city to city when she was young, at one point bringing her to a particularly conservative region of Georgia. She obtained a copy of the “Satanic Bible” and tried reading it in class, but her teacher took it away. She also clashed with her teachers over dress; when the school directed students to “Dress for Success,” she snidely told administrators her torn jeans and t-shirts reflected her desire to “succeed” as a “dirty-ass punk rock star.” Her negative attitude towards schooling was compounded by the experience of pervasive racial discrimination.

At the start of high school, Leia joined the “Spartacist League,” a Trotskyist socialist party. Through her involvement in the group, she had her first opportunity to participate in collective, contentious politics, attending protests against the KKK and police-brutality. Looking back, she was uncertain about the rigid communist ideology and hierarchical structure of the Spartacists, which was a far cry from the loose, consensus-based organizing into which she ultimately decided to put her energy. Nevertheless, she appreciated the radical introduction the

communists gave her: “I joined it [the Spartacists] without knowing what I was joining. But they taught me a lot about politics.”

As with the other two interviewees, Leia could not offer a precise moment where she became “politicized” or “radicalized.” Instead, all three emphasized that they were *always* political. Years later, together they were often some of the most forceful voices calling for freegan.info to take part in overt and confrontational anti-capitalist actions—of precisely the sort that these women had been engaging in for as long as they could remember.

Rebellion: Against Parents, Schools, and Society

Thirteen freegans offered a divergent narrative, centered on childhood “rebellion” against parents, schools, and society as a whole. Rather than being channeled into leftist movements by their families, these future freegans found themselves resisting parental dictates and formal schooling on their own. Jonathan is a twenty-five year-old freegan, whose shaved head, dark goatee, and thick-rimmed glasses give him the bearing of a early-20th century Russian revolutionary. In addition to being a freegan, Jonathan is currently involved with anti-circumcision and pro-Palestinian organizing—a stark rejection of his upbringing in Brooklyn’s Orthodox Jewish Community:

In my family, the only politics that mattered was whether the President was pro-Israel or not. That’s the extent of how political my parents were. My parents didn’t vote, but they did read the Jewish Press...Nobody in my family is remotely political in any sense. They keep to themselves, they work, they support their families, and that’s it. The outside world is just something to fear and hate. They interact with it as little as possible. Jonathan claimed that he chafed under the strictures of an Orthodox upbringing from an early age: “Because I was sort of really good at school work and stuff, I felt like sitting in class was

just punishment, like jail. I did really well, all the time, yet I still had to sit. I always rebelled against teachers, rabbis, whatever.” When he was eight, he asked to be transferred to a non-religious school—a request his father denied—and by fifteen, he declared to his parents’ horror that he no longer believed in God.

Making sense of Jonathan’s early rebellion is challenging. His political proclivities certainly did not come from his immediate social milieu: Jonathan insisted that he had little exposure to non-conservative, non-Orthodox ideas as a youth, and none of siblings shared his iconoclastic views. Like many freegans, Jonathan claimed that the seeds of his political beliefs were “just there” for as long as he could remember.

Other elements of Jonathan’s early experiences do, however, map onto his present-day engagement. As he explained, his family was affluent until his uncle got in trouble with the tax authorities, at which point their fortunes soured. Jonathan was one of the few freegans (alongside Leia) who described material deprivation in his childhood:

We were pretty poor; I couldn’t get proper dental care when I needed it. My parents live in a small, three-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn. They’ve lived there since I was one. And we were a family of seven in a tiny three-bedroom. So why did we have to live in such cramped quarters? It just kind of sucked not having the same privileges as other people.

Rather than craving the perquisites of those around him, though, the experience left Jonathan disavowing their value entirely: “I noticed that people who did have those privileges... I really didn’t like them. People who have lots of money, they go shopping a lot, and buy things from fancy clothing stores...I was never really into that. I always thought it was a waste of money.”

Tall and muscular, Jason has a strikingly different bearing from Jonathan but shared in his adolescent rebellion. He, too, described an early obstreperousness that defied easy explanation. Despite growing up in a middle-class family, “by 7th grade, I was basically an anarchist, even though I didn’t run into cool adults who could nurture that.” He characterized himself as one of “the kids with long black hair and trench coats and Nine-Inch Nails [an alternative metal band] t-shirts”: in short, a social outcast. As a result of his and his friends’ unconventional style—an aesthetic that, during the 1990s, became associated with the perpetrators of school shootings—when his high school received bomb threats, “Everyone always suspected us.” When the police interrogated one of his friends, Jason recalled feeling like he was the only person who thought there was something wrong with this intrusion into his friend’s life. These experiences were disillusioning, but disconnected from any political ideology: “I remember thinking, ‘Man, cops suck, this system sucks, it all sucks.’”

Although it’s difficult to be sure whether these words reflected Jason’s feelings at the time or his perception looking back on it, it is clear from that he saw his background as crucial to understanding his involvement in freeganism. As he reiterated, “I was always radical. Sometimes it was latent, sometimes it wasn’t encouraged, sometimes it was covered up by other things. But I was always radical.” What Jason lacked, however, was a cause into which he could channel his frustration.

Recycling, Reuse, and Reduction

Finally, there were six interviewees who described little in the way of early radicalization or youthful rebellion. In their own way, though, they found deep roots out of which their freeganism would eventually grow. Quinn pithily encapsulated what I refer to as a narrative of “recycling, reuse, and reduction”: “Growing up, consumerism was gross. Freegan.info was just a

mature version of me when I was younger.” These freegans connected their pasts and presents by highlighting not their consistent political radicalism or long-running rebellion against authority, but a continuity of personal practices around waste and consumption.

Janet, a high-school Spanish teacher in her mid-40s, assured me that she grew up feeling “appreciated, loved, and comfortable.” Yet she was always “intrinsically non-wasting,” despite the material abundance of her family life and a complete absence of external influences that would make her that way. She recalled that, even when she was a teenager surrounded by shopping-obsessed peers, she never wanted new clothes: “If someone gave me a sweater, I would leave it hanging in my closet for a year before wearing it. I preferred hand-me-downs.” Even when she did engage in more mainstream adolescent pursuits—like listening to music—she did so with a frugal twist: rather than buying records, she would wait for a favorite song to come on the radio and then tape record it.

Marie—a French student who became involved in freegan.info in early 2012—offered a similar story, but with a clearer explanation of where her obsession with reducing consumption came from:

My parents are kind of crazy for not wasting. My father, when he needs hot water, and it comes out cold from the tap, he puts a bowl under to take the water and not to waste it...My mother, she would repair any object. I've seen her taking things like toothpaste from a tube with a syringe not to waste the insides. They don't waste food at all: we always eat the yogurts two months after the expiration date.

Despite growing up in privilege, Marie thoroughly internalized her parents' non-wasting ethic:

I grew up in a wealthy environment, I never lacked anything, so I had all that I wanted when I was young. And as far as I can remember, I've always wanted nothing, and I'd

say ‘I don’t want this, I don’t want this.’ I never wanted anything, no material things, no toys or clothes.

I asked Marie if there was any ideological or political dimension to her early non-wasting practices. She laughed, “No. Now I see it [political significance], but of course it didn’t, because it started when I was four years old: ‘What do you want for Christmas?’ ‘Oh, I want nothing.’ It wasn’t political.”

Lanky with a goatee and scraggly hair, Gio gave another version of the “recycling, reuse, and reduction” narrative. Gio’s parents, he admitted, were “pretty conservative,” having fled to the U.S. from Cuba during the communist revolution. Nevertheless, in high school, he developed “a reputation as a moocher” because, at lunch time:

I would see my friends with a half-eaten slice of pizza, and I would say, ‘No, no, no I’ll eat that.’ I would basically clean up after everyone else, eating other people’s leftovers, what other people at the table considered garbage that they were going to throw away, and I thought, ‘That’s still edible, that’s still food, don’t throw that away.’

A turning point came when one of his friends pulled an uneaten slice of pizza out of the garbage and ate it: “Everyone thought it was totally gross. But I was like, inspired. I thought ‘Wow, he’s taking it to another level. I’ve never thought to eat out of the garbage.’”

As with Janet, his aversion to waste could not be traced to any easily identified influence: it was simply there. In a way, these freegans always saw past the “fetish of waste”: “I’ve never had that stigma, I could always see beyond the idea that ‘If it’s in the garbage can, it’s garbage.’” Still, he did not undertake thrift, non-wasting, and recycling with a political goal in mind, but instead with a reflexive sense that “waste” was simply stupid.

As all three different narratives highlight, while freegans' transitions to becoming freegan were full of choices—moments where freegans chose a more radical path where others did not—they nonetheless explained those choices as attempts to be true to their own inherent activist core.⁶ Analytically, the divergent narratives that freegans used to frame their early experiences—“radicalization,” “rebellion,” and “recycling, reuse, and reduction”—also hint at the divergent meanings that they ultimately attached to freeganism itself. These differences, in turn, presage some of the movement's fissures—which I describe later.⁷

Frustrated Lifestyles and Vegan Disillusionment

How did these diverse childhood experiences converge on freeganism? Unsurprisingly, many freegans with narratives of “reduction” or “rebellion” had their first exposure to overt and collective political action during college.⁸ Sowmya, a student studying environmental technology in New York but originally from Bangalore, India, told me that she had always believed that “without activism, life is useless.” She then rattled off a list of organizations she was involved with when she was in college: the World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Each is a large, professional non-profit with mass-memberships, engaged in a fairly standard mix of symbolic protest and lobbying for legislative reform. Needless to say, they have little in common with freegan.info.

Overwhelmingly, freegans told me that their initial political commitments were to environmentalism and animal rights—not anti-capitalism or anti-waste. As Sowmya explained, “I began with animal rights, and I still see myself as an animal rights activist.” When Sowmya

⁶ They thus mirror the way the right-wing activists studied by Blee (2002:51) presented seemingly deviant and unconventional choices as “involuntary, automatic, and unconscious.”

⁷ (see Munson 2008; Viterna 2006).

⁸ All but two of the twenty-two interviewees from freegan.info had a college degree.

first moved to New York to continue her education, she attended, by her own report, almost every anti-fur protest she could find. Yet these experiences ultimately led to disillusionment: looking back on hundreds of hours of sign-waving, chanting, and leafleting, she said, “I’m not sure what any of that accomplished.”

Her story is not uncommon. Even in the face of widely divergent childhood narratives, sixteen of twenty-two *freegan.info* participants I interviewed said that they were vegetarians or vegans prior to becoming freegans.⁹ The origins of “freeganism” as a movement may lie in the anarchist community, but as individuals, *freegan.info* participants almost all got their start in animal rights.¹⁰

The intensity of freegans’ early commitment to veganism and animal rights was still evident during our interviews. David, a graduate student involved in both *freegan.info* and FNB, who says that he wears t-shirts advertising animal rights every single day, avowed to me, “I do not believe it is okay to kill animals for anything no matter what” and that “I would never promote the consumption or use of any animal product.” Similarly, Cindy once told me that she would not approve of keeping a beehive for honey, even if not a single bee was harmed: “I don’t believe in humans having dominion over animals and I don’t believe in non-human animals belonging to humans.” Many more casual attendees of freegan events also appear to come from the animal rights community. As one participant in a wild food foraging tour told me, “‘freeganism’ shares the same root as ‘vegan’, so it must be good.”

⁹ For comparison, the figure for the U.S. population writ-large is 5% vegetarian, 2% vegan, although the degree of overlap between the two is uncertain (Newport 2012).

¹⁰ Not coincidentally, one of Adam’s favorite essays is Brian Dominick’s pamphlet “Animal Liberation and Social Revolution,” which publicized the term “veganarchy”—a marriage between anarchism and veganism.

This extreme concern for animals is not just held by freegans individually, but also as a collective. Statistics about the harmful impacts of animal agriculture are among the first discussed in freegan events.¹¹ One of freegan.info's only formal policies pertains to live animals, and states that:

Animals are not food and not trash. Occasionally on trash tours, we find live animals in the garbage, discarded by food retailers. We want to stress that freegan trash tours are NOT expeditions to collect live animals for food—if you find a clam, lobster, mussel, or other live creature, please return the creature to an appropriate water body, NOT a cooking pot. At times we also find mice stuck to glue traps, insects stuck to fly paper or caught in plastic bags, and other instances of animals in peril in human refuse. Please consider helping these animals to find freedom and escape injury.

Of course, a trash tour is unlikely to ever encounter a live pig or chicken in Manhattan (although both once roamed there). As such, the policy indicates how many freegans' concerns for animals extend far beyond the mammals and birds that capture more mainstream animal-rights activists'

¹¹ The connection between animal agriculture and environmental devastation is now both well documented and compelling. Adam frequently mentioned a report from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization that found that livestock account for 55% of global erosion as well as one-third of all the nitrogen and phosphorous that goes into water supplies (Steinfeld et al. 2006). Tallying the carbon emitted from cutting forests for pastures and fields with gases coming directly from the animals themselves and the trucks, planes, and ships that move them, 18% of CO(2) equivalent greenhouse gases come from animal agriculture. This same study finds that livestock are implicated in the decline of 85% of all threatened species.

Livestock production is highly inefficient: feeding and raising animals takes up 80% of agricultural land, but provide only 15% of total calories (Horlings and Marsden 2011:449). As such, an animal-based diet places a far heavier strain on the environment than a plant-based one. It requires 284 gallons of oil and 792,000 gallons of water to produce a 1000 pound steer (Singer and Mason 2006). Meat takes twelve times as much water, calorie-for-calorie, as producing bread, sixty-four times as much as potatoes, and eighty-six times as much as tomatoes.

concern. I've watched Adam sit on a curb during a trash tour frantically picking insects off a piece of wax paper, and berate others for their lack of concern towards invertebrates.

On an ethical level, most freegans think that there is no problem with eating meat from a dumpster, because doing so does not funnel money towards animal exploitation. Yet, in contrast to other studies which find that freegans widely practice “meaganism” (eating animal products if they come from the trash),¹² only three of my interviewees admitted to eating dumpstered meat. When freegans cater for other activist events or hold freegan feasts, the food they prepare is almost always strictly vegan. During trash tours, specialty vegan items like soy ice cream or seitan are quickly snatched up, while choice cuts of beef or salmon frequently go unclaimed. Many freegan-vegans will sneak the occasionally pastry with milk or eggs in them, but are recalcitrant when caught in the act. One night, I found Janet munching on a muffin around the corner from the Gristedes where the tour was diving. “Oh my god!” I jokingly exclaimed. “Don’t tell anyone,” she replied, “especially not god.” When Sasha said he dumpster-dived behind McDonald’s during one speaking tour through middle-America—an admission that drew judging glances from those around him—he was compelled to add, “Well, it’s really not convenient to be starving all the time.”

To some extent, freegans stay vegan out of force of habit; others, because they think animal products from the dumpster are likely to be unsafe. More importantly, though, many freegans saw being vegan as not just one part of their political identities, but central to it. “I like staying vegan while being freegan,” Zaac explained, “Because it reminds me that I’m doing all this for the animals.” At the same time, though, freegans almost all talked about becoming freegan as a way of moving *beyond* veganism. In fact, the typical arc of radicalization freegans

¹² (Edwards and Mercer 2007).

described to me usually went from vegetarianism to veganism to freeganism. Given the fact that many freegans' first experiences of political action were with vegetarian, vegan, or animal rights organizations, then, it is thus worth taking a step back to consider what kind of a social movement the modern animal rights movement (ARM) actually *is*, and how the weaknesses of that movement might have pushed some individuals towards freeganism.¹³

The first organizations created to promote vegetarianism in the West emerged in Britain in the 19th century. Vegetarianism was one cause emerging from a general ferment of interest in social change among the growing middle-class: vegetarian activists were involved not only in advocacy for animals, but also for pacifism, abolition, women's rights, and prison reform.¹⁴ As such, both its practitioners and the general public saw vegetarianism as "strongly associated with an egalitarian, anti-structural ethic,"¹⁵ a challenge to anyone who would "dominate, subordinate, exploit, and oppress one who is 'inferior',"¹⁶ whatever their species. Well into the early 20th century, vegetarians were lumped in with "communists, anarchists ... and other non-conformists"¹⁷ in the popular imagination. Certainly, the modern ARM retains some of its past association with demands for systemic change. For many anarchists today, for example, a vegan diet is part of "prefiguring" a future non-violent society,¹⁸ which is why vegetarianism is one of Food Not Bombs' core principles.

Nonetheless, the *mainstream* ARM—represented by groups like PETA and the Humane Society of the United States—shares little in common with its nineteenth-century predecessor.

¹³ For the sake of simplicity, I use the terms "vegetarian movement" and "animal rights movement" interchangeably, although they are not the same thing.

¹⁴ (Leneman 1999; Stuart 2006).

¹⁵ (Twigg 1979:16).

¹⁶ (Fox 1999:14).

¹⁷ (Heider 1994:27).

¹⁸ (Graeber 2009:263).

Veganism is now “super-trendy” and animal rights a “hip cause,”¹⁹ but growing acceptance and popularity have, in the eyes of freegans, come at a price. For all their concern for other species, many freegans nonetheless questioned the ARM’s single-minded focus on animals. Cindy told me, for example, that Wetlands used to organize anti-fur protests in conjunction with animal rights organizations. When she and others pushed for the protests also to address human labor conditions and sweatshops, “we got slammed” by activists who wanted to keep an exclusive focus on animals. As David noted, “You [don’t] have to be progressive or radical or critical of the oppressive institutions around us to be vegan. And a lot of people who are extremely oppressive and extremely fucked up and involved in these institutions are still vegan.”²⁰

Freegans tied the ARM’s failure to address the interconnections between human and animal oppression to the movement’s narrow demographic profile.²¹ Survey data suggests that participants in the ARM are overwhelmingly white, well educated, and wealthy.²² As Lola described it, “Veganism has really exploded in the hipster community. Everyone is riding their fixed gear [bike] and eating the weirdest food they can find. In one sense, it’s exciting because

¹⁹ (Franklin 1999:186).

²⁰ Freegans’ critiques appear to be confirmed by the academic literature. Far from offering a wide-reaching critique of different forms of hierarchy and domination, modern day animal rights groups are now focused on a “narrowly defined set of issues...with little regard to their implications for other ideological questions” (Jasper and Nelkin 1992:41). Survey evidence suggests that concern for animals is unrelated to other political preferences and that vegetarians are no more likely than the general population to be politically active (Mauer 2002:13).

²¹ For criticisms of racism and sexism in the animal rights movement, see (Adams 1990; Francione 1996; Torres 2007).

²² (Jasper and Nelkin 1992; Munro 2000). One ethnographer claims that less than 5% of participants in vegetarian groups are people of color (Mauer 2002:10). On the other hand, some have offered an “underdog hypothesis” that claims racial minorities and other oppressed groups are actually more likely to sympathize with the plight of animals (Jerolmack 2003; Kendall, Lobao, and Sharp 2006; Nibert 1994). These observations are not mutually exclusive: people of color could be a potential constituency for the ARM yet still be excluded from it by oppressive or non-inclusive practices.

people are looking at the world in a new way.” Her tone then shifted, “But a lot of the vegans I know are yuppies and very classist. They eat at over-priced restaurants in gentrifying neighborhoods. They don’t think about the social impacts and exclusivity of their dietary practices.” A lot of vegans she knew, she added, eat “crappily.” The epithet had a double meaning: “There is this laziness to a lot of vegans that you can just eat oreos and drink orange juice. And then there are the people who buy only processed soy products. So they’re supporting a corporation that is destroying fields and taking over family farms. Then there’s all the plastic...” She trailed off, before adding, “I guess in college I realized just how abusive it still is to be vegetarian.”

As Lola attested, over time many freegans became skeptical of the ethics underlying the ARM’s signature tactic: purchasing animal-free products. They came to this conclusion through different paths. For Sowmya, disillusionment came from the realization that an isolated vegan’s actions were just a drop in the bucket: “People think ‘Oh, I’m vegan or I’m vegetarian and I’m going to save the world’ and now they have a halo. But it’s way beyond that. It does make a difference, but it’s negligible.” Future freegans also began to question the ethics behind vegan commodities themselves. Adam, for example, told me of his shock when he realized that vegan food production still destroys and displaces wildlife habitat, and that the machines used to harvest vegan crops kill millions of small rodents.²³ Others focused on the non-animal abuses behind vegan products. As Zaac told me, “A lot of vegans are locked into a constant competition to prove, ‘I’m more vegan than you’, so they fret about a trivial amount of cow bones in refined

²³ He cited with particular horror a study that claimed more animal lives would be saved in total by eating grass-fed beef than switching to veganism (Davis 2003). He also noted that manure and ground animal bones were applied in the growth of “vegan” crops, particularly on organic farms that do not use chemical fertilizers. The result was that “by being a vegan consumer, I was actually creating more profits for factory farms” by generating demand for animal by-products.

sugar but ignore the petroleum products in a vegan item's packaging." When one trash-tour attendee asked me if I *really* thought that harm to bees meant that vegans should eschew honey, Zaac interjected: "You don't even need to think about the bees. Think about the working conditions for the honey collectors. Think about all the chemicals they use."

Freegans gradually linked problems with vegan products themselves to concerns about the corporate entities that were selling them. When small-scale farms and grocery cooperatives first marketed organic and vegetarian products in the 1960s, large agribusiness perceived them as a threat.²⁴ Now, though, food providers, from large distributors to fast-food chains, have recognized vegetarians as an affluent niche market that provides a "new marketing and profit-generating opportunity."²⁵ Organic sales have grown at an extraordinary 20% per year since 1990, but the standards that underpin them have steadily eroded.²⁶ More and more product lines marked as "organic," "vegan," or "fair-trade" are owned by large corporations.²⁷ Money that goes to purchase these products, then, supports the bottom-line of companies that *also* market foods that are anything but organic, vegan, and fair trade.²⁸

Many consumers use the organic shelf at a supermarket as a proxy for whether what is on offer is "ethical."²⁹ But, as freegans realized, just reading the label to see if a food contained animal products or was fair-trade and organic was no guide to whether or not a foodstuff was

²⁴ As Belasco (2007:111) writes, in the eyes of agribusiness "the organic paradigm questioned conventional science, challenged the prevailing system of food distribution, and advocated a radical decentralization of population and power."

²⁵ (Beardsworth and Keil 1993:233).

²⁶ (Jaffee and Howard 2010:390).

²⁷ (Howard 2009).

²⁸ Not coincidentally, many recently lines of organic products recently acquired by large agribusinesses make no mention of their ownership on their product labels. Yet this fact is largely irrelevant to most modern consumers of vegan and organic goods because the majority do so for health, not ethical or political, reasons (Stiles 1998; Szasz 2007:149; West 2012:218).

²⁹ (Eden, Bear, and Walker 2008:1051).

truly “ethical.”³⁰ Money is too fungible, and globalized capitalist economies too interconnected, for it to be so simple. Noted Wendy, “You can buy only the vegan stuff at the buffet bar at a place like Whole Foods, but you’re funding everything at that bar if you buy from it. So there’s not that much difference from being vegan in that respect.”

For some of the earliest freegans, their criticism of veganism focused on the ARM’s failure to challenge capitalism. The anonymous author of *Why Freegan* writes:

The vegan theory is essentially a boycott of any products that injure animals in their production. The vegan consumers are flexing their monetary muscle and ‘voting with their dollars’ for the products that don’t injure animals. These dollars are voting for coca-cola [sic], big corporate grocery stores, greasy-fast food (we all know Taco Bell vegans), and worse. Shouldn’t truly conscientious folks seek something more? I don’t vote because no matter who I vote for, the government always wins and when you ‘vote with your dollars’, consumerism always wins, capitalism always wins.³¹

Adam summarized the same point in more succinct terms, remarking “For all of the ridicule that vegans face from the mainstream public, ultimately they are still playing within the rules.

Whether a consumer responds to one marketing pitch or another, they are still buying in, still acting as a cog in the capitalist machine.” As far as he was concerned, under neo-liberal

³⁰ To offer one example: the “Animal Care Certified” label still permits chicken producers to starve hens for two weeks before they molt, give them a “meager” allowance of space that barely allows them to spread their wings, cut off beaks without anesthetic, and discard male chicks into a dumpster at birth (Singer and Mason 2006:40).

³¹ As the author goes on to argue, “The packaging from vegan food doesn’t take up less space in the landfill or consume less resources just because the food is vegan. The whole produce and consume dynamic is still played out, but the setting is a fancy health food store instead of a supermarket. Veganism is not a threat, or a challenge to the wasteful practices of our capitalist society.”

capitalism, even the morals of animal rights activists had been commoditized and sold back to them in the form of high-end veggie-burgers and cruelty-free cosmetics. The profits eventually cycled back into the same agricultural system that vegans thought they were protesting.

Freegans' critiques of the mainstream ARM movement as elitist and insufficiently willing to draw connections between different forms of oppression did not lead freegans to discard veganism entirely. Instead, it sparked freegans to look for alternatives—to find ways to make their deeply-held commitments to living without human, animal, or ecological exploitation into something both personally meaningful and socially transformative. Leia summarized the enduring connection between the two: “Freeganism directly taps into the idea of becoming vegan for political reasons, because it is a boycott of animal exploitation. If all you care about is health, you can just buy vegan products. But if your main concern is that you don’t want to give your hard-earned cash for animal cruelty, then that’s what freeganism is about.”

The Limits of Pocketbook Politics

This extended excursus into the history of the animal rights movement might seem like a detour, but it’s emblematic of the much larger story of how activism in the United States has changed in recent decades. Freegan.info, as we will see, both reflects and rejects those changes. Although the “New Left” movements of the 1960s evoked classic Marxist themes like the exploitation of labor or unjust concentration of wealth, they *also* critiqued capitalism by arguing that the market squelched creativity, homogenized everyday life, and left little room for individual expression.³² Clever executives and marketers took these demands for authenticity, uniqueness, and self-actualization and packaged them into commodities. Since the 1960s,

³² (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005:170).

demands for collective liberation coming from the gay rights, women's, or environmental movements have all been channeled into niche markets and specialty products.³³

If many people choose to express their concerns about the environment, animals, or workers through buying things, they can be forgiven for it. After all, we are accustomed to addressing a range of problems in our personal lives through consumption, so why not address collective political problems the same way?³⁴ Still, there is something a little absurd about adopting consumerism as the central tactic of modern progressivism: as one sociologist wryly observesm “The planet is warming, biodiversity loss is rampant, freshwater sources are dwindling and tainted, and public health is at risk due to environmental pollutants. One of the latest efforts to stop the looming socio-ecological catastrophe(s) is shopping.”³⁵ The increasing salience of consumer activism in American politics expresses a profound shift in how we see ourselves as political actors.³⁶ In a sense, consumer activism accepts the fundamentally neo-liberal notion that we are primarily citizens not of nations or communities or religions or ethnicities, but of the *market*.³⁷ This mode of change-through-purchasing is emblematic of the fact that many movements once committed to *changing* capitalism now place an enormous faith in the power of capitalism to effect change.

³³ For discussions of the rise of consumer activism, see (Autio, Heinskanen, and Heinonen 2009; Dubuisson-Quellier 2013; Haydu and Kadanoff 2010; King and Pearce 2010; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Pichardo Almanzar, Sullivan-Catlin, and Deane 1998).

³⁴ This point is made by Szasz (2007).

³⁵ Gunderson (2014:110).

³⁶ Note that “consumers’ movements” throughout American history have not always focused on individual choices in the market place. Early consumer advocacy groups lobbied for more systematic change through state action (Cohen 2003; Jacobs 2005; Szasz 2007).

³⁷ Numerous authors have argued that consumer activism is fundamentally neo-liberal activism. For a few, see (Barnett et al. 2005; Busch 2010; Guthman 2008; Johnston 2008; West 2012).

But, as freegans realized in their forays into veganism, the idea that consumer activism is useful strategy for fighting injustice depends on a certain view of how capitalism works. It assumes that there is some fundamental truth to conventional microeconomics, which states that changes in demand lead to a change in price, which in turn leads to changes in supply. Vegans believe, in effect, that an invisible hand will carry their desire for more kale and less bacon—a preference they express in dollars at the cash-register—all the way to the factory farm, which will raise fewer pigs as a result. This is, as sociologist Samantha MacBride puts it, the “story the environmental [and other consumer movements] tells itself”³⁸: that individual consumer demand exerts a powerful influence over the shape of the economy as a whole. In a sense, it’s another form of the commodity fetish, by which the things we buy are “granted mystical powers to create significant progressive changes,”³⁹ despite the fact that—historically—progressive change has virtually *never* come through consumer choices.⁴⁰ What’s important to realize here is that this story rests on the idea that markets are efficient: that is to say, it assumes that markets function with a minimum of waste. Consumer activism wouldn’t work if the things that consumer activists are boycotting still get produced, yet wind up ex-commodified and in the trash.

This portrayal of how capitalism works isn’t just a tale for activists. It’s also the story that the boosters of free markets have told us for a long, long time. Early advocates (like Adam Smith) for economic liberalism—that is, the kind of liberalism that calls for free trade and private property—framed themselves as “waging a relentless battle against ‘inefficiencies’, or

³⁸ (2012:116).

³⁹ Gunderson (2014:114)

⁴⁰ Dubuisson-Quellier (2013) shows that, even when “ethical consumption” has been successful, it has not been through market forces, but instead by aiding to mobilize networks and groups for more conventional forms of political action.

wastes, of all sorts.”⁴¹ This way of justifying markets was also on view during a pivotal moment in the history of capitalism, the British enclosure movement of the 18th century, whereby English peasants were dispossessed from the land on which they survived as subsistence farmers and forced to move to cities and sell their labor.⁴² English politicians and intellectuals claimed that the “common wastes”—unoccupied lands that peasants used for grazing, firewood, and hunting—were actually under-utilized “wasted commons.”⁴³ Zaac from freegan.info talked about how the same claims about “waste” were used in the American colonies:

The central mythology used to justify manifest destiny was [John] Locke’s concept of waste. The idea was that if a rich, elite landowners lets apples rot on the ground, then he doesn’t deserve those trees, so we can take them. This was never really used to displace the aristocracy, though, but instead the native peoples who ‘underused’ the land, in the colonists’ eyes.⁴⁴

Bringing us back to the present, claims about “waste” are central to the neo-liberal project of expanding the role of markets worldwide.⁴⁵ Advocates for neo-liberal policies from Great Britain to Mexico have argued that, however we feel about the impacts of free markets on

⁴¹ (Gidwani and Reddy 2011:1633).

⁴² Discussions of various aspects of the enclosure movement can be found in (Aston and Philpin 1987; Federici 2004; Marx 1976:Ch.27; Thompson 1975).

⁴³ As one analysis of debates about enclosures uncovers, “Discourses of enclosure...are overrun with accusations of inefficiency, impropriety, immorality, unprofitability, or in the most general terms...waste” among the peasantry (Goldstein 2013:370).

⁴⁴ His statement, as he explicitly acknowledged, was drawn from Cronon (1983).

⁴⁵ To offer one example, a wave of “land grabs” in the developing world have often been framed in terms of making better use of “‘marginal’, ‘idle’, and ‘waste’ lands” (Borras and Franco 2012:45). The parallels with the English enclosure movement should be self-evident. To offer another, Tomic et al. (2006) recount how in Chile—which, under the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet became an early playground for the ideas of neo-liberal economists—notions of “cleanliness” and waste elimination were prominent in the regime’s claims to legitimacy.

labor conditions or income inequality, they “work.”⁴⁶ One reason they work is that, thanks to the magic of price signals and supply and demand, they reduce waste. One study which examined texts used to teach administration, business, and economics found that, within them, “competitive private enterprise is always deemed more effective and efficient than non-profit-marketing organizations...since they reduce the waste of resources,” whether “resources” are defined as money, goods, or time.⁴⁷

Neo-liberalism’s preference for market-led solutions—whether with respect to provisioning health care or protecting the environment—is also buttressed by deriding any alternatives to market-led models as “wasteful.” Newspaper portrayals of the Communist countries of Eastern Europe frequently pointed to how “wasteful” they were compared to the “cleanliness, efficiency, and thriftiness of Western capitalism.”⁴⁸ Closer to home, public statements in defense of neo-liberal policies are frequently couched in the notion that we cannot tolerate “wasteful” government programs.⁴⁹ Noted one public-opinion surveyor:

Suburbanites say they oppose government waste, but they clearly do not oppose it across the board. Waste, in their lexicon, is defined as those programs that spend billions upon billions of dollars to help cities, minorities, and the poor. Equally expensive programs that primarily benefit the white middle class are not deemed ‘wasteful’.⁵⁰

A google search of “government waste” yields a host of different advocacy groups—like Citizens Against Government Waste—and reports—like Senator Tom Coburn’s government

⁴⁶ (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002:535).

⁴⁷ Boltanski and Chiapello (2005:13).

⁴⁸ (Gille 2008:3).

⁴⁹ According to neo-liberal advocates, “the inefficiencies of government-provided goods and services would be replaced by the allegedly greater efficiencies of the competitive marketplace” (Busch 2010:334).

⁵⁰ (Thomas 1998:162).

“wastebook”—that relentlessly assert the profligacy of the state.⁵¹ An analogous search for “capitalism and waste” returns a few obscure socialist manifestos and the freegan.info website.

In the first part of this book, I talked about “waste” in the form of ex-commodities: that is, physical stuff. As these examples show, though, “waste” is also a set of ideas, labels, and representations loosely attached to that stuff.⁵² For a long time, “waste” has served as a potent symbol for anything that is under-used or inefficient—a term laden with connotations of impropriety and turpitude. It is, I argue, a core element of the fetish of waste: the notion that governments, non-profit organizations, or individual consumers produce waste but free markets don’t. It is central to the view of capitalism to which consumer activists who “vote with their dollars” implicitly ascribe. Yet, as the first two chapters suggested, it is at odds with the physical production of ex-commodities in the neo-liberal economy.

For the founders of freegan.info—Adam and Wendy—their first experiences dumpster diving exposed this disconnect and were the nail-in-the-coffin for consumer activism. Wendy recalled the first time she found the waste outside a supermarket and thought to herself, “What the hell is this?” Reflecting on her experience salvaging ex-commodities, she explained:

I’ve seen first-hand that if a bunch more vegans or health-conscious people move into an area over a period of time, they [grocery stores] are not going to sell less meat, they’re just going to sell more soy products. They’ll add more products to their shelves, but when has a store ever sold less meat? The place doesn’t *not* have meat soup because they have

⁵¹ As Przeworski (1985:41), the apparent efficiency of the private sector and wastefulness of the state is partly a product of the fact that the state is assigned to provide *inherently inefficient* public goods, while more profitable realms are reserved for the private sector.

⁵² As Gille (2008) points out, “waste” is always a hybrid between the material and the symbolic, but the two are not always in sync with one another.

vegans; they just have both. And if a package of meat isn't sold, it's probably just going to get thrown out.

From this, she concluded that pretty much anything—even lobbying politicians she despised—would be more effective than buying tofu. Adam expressed similar outrage when he started dumpster diving in an effort to stop supporting animal-abusing enterprises. On one level, seeing meat go to waste only fueled his outrage:

The injustices that are endured in the manufacture of these products becomes even more obscene when we consider that they will never be used. As inherently disgraceful as the massive cruelty of factory farming is, we add insult to injury when we discard massive numbers of chickens whole and unsold on a daily basis, meaning that these sentient beings lived lives of suffering and died in terror and agony merely to be discarded as a waste product.

Discovering that over 20% of meat and nearly 50% of seafood goes to waste⁵³ did something more, though: it convinced Adam that the choices of an individual consumer have no chance of impeding the capitalist behemoth. As he told me in our interview:

All the time, I see vegans wearing t-shirts that say, 'I saved 84 animals this year.' And I always think, 'No, you didn't. 84 more animals got thrown in a trashcan because you are vegan.' There's not some guy at the store saying, 'Bob went vegan this week, let's order one less chicken.' There's nothing that precise going on in terms of how stores are ordering commodities.

⁵³ (Gustavsson et al. 2011:8). One figure suggests that as much as 90% of the total biomass taken from the oceans by fishermen is not consumed (Clover 2004:64).

As Adam made clear, his rejection of veganism as a form of transformative political action was also a rejection of the dominant narrative of how capitalism works, which portrays free markets as efficient because they operate with a minimum of waste. Ex-commodities were the physical proof that this assertion—a core part of the fetish of waste—was patently false.

Searching for an Activist Fit

To some extent, though, our narrative has gotten ahead of itself. At the time future freegans were becoming disillusioned with veganism and other forms of consumer activism, few of them had seen past the fetish of waste or discovered the existence of ex-commodities. Nonetheless, each perceived the same basic flaws: staid and ineffective tactics, a failure to draw linkages between different issues, and an obsession *either* with personal consumption choices disconnected from broader, systemic change *or* a naïve faith in voting, lobbying, or pressure on elected officials. Lola reflected on a series of public demonstrations at her university, telling me:

People seemed obsessed with fashioning their activism in the image of the civil rights or anti-war movements of the sixties. But when you think about it, things haven't really changed. And if they *have* changed, they haven't progressed. So why do we keep doing the same things?

Jonathan, who had been working with groups organizing against the Iraq War—many of which were dominated by activists who had gotten their start in the movement against the *Vietnam* War⁵⁴—offered a similar assessment: “I started to feel disaffected and distant from those previous groups that I had organized with in college...It just didn't feel like we were hitting the nail on the head. I didn't feel like I was really getting to where I wanted to be.”

⁵⁴ The persisting dominance of US social movements by activists who began their political engagement in the 1960s is documented by Caren et al. (2011).

At the same time, most freegans did not have a readily available alternative into which to channel their energy. Although drastically different models of activism existed—offered by, for example, direct action and anarchist movements—few freegans (aside from the “radicals”) were aware of their existence. After all, aside from occasional dramatic moments of protest like Occupy or the Anti-Globalization Movement, anarchist movements are largely hidden away in marginal spaces like abandoned-lot gardens, short-term squats, and scattered infoshops. So how did freegan.info participants go from single-issue, consumption-oriented activism to an anti-capitalist movement that *rejected* purchasing commodities as an appropriate tactic?

My interviews suggest that, for most freegans, the jump from more conventional activism to freeganism was preceded by an intense period of personal research. As one interviewee described:

I’ve always been into figuring things out, looking underneath things, understanding things that don’t make sense. And this whole thing [mainstream environmental and animal rights movements], it doesn’t make sense. I don’t think that thinking about these things is a waste of time. Activism in the wrong direction—that’s what the people that are in control of the world want. They want you to take to the streets and scream and yell and have that be worthless.

Zaac, a thin computer engineer from Connecticut, carries a well-worn spiral-bound notebook with him to all freegan events. Inside, written in cramped handwriting, are summaries of a vast array of bicycle repair manuals, guides to edible wild plants, recipes for herbal remedies, and radical anti-capitalist literature. He added, straight-faced, “You never know when you might need a summary of [the prominent early 20th century German anarchist] Emma Goldman’s writings on a note card.” Zaac told me he dumpster-dives books from a nearby store and adds

them to an ever-growing stack by his bedside: “A lot of those books never should have been printed, but every once in a while, you find something on black power or race and that’s cool.” His passion for exploring political philosophy, radical ecology, and do-it-yourself practices through reading was evidenced by his bi-monthly hour-long train rides into New York City to attend freegan.info’s reading group. In so doing, Zaac was continuing the behaviors that, he told me, led him to freeganism in the first place.

Reading led many freegans to see capitalism—and the failure to confront it—as the key issue their previous activism had left unaddressed. Sasha explained how, when he first came to New York, he was “studying hardcore” and realized that “the stuff that I was reading was presenting itself really heavily in my daily life.” His study, he said “dismantled this wall that was guarding me from a life outside of capitalism, outside of the structure of daily life which seems so natural. I guess I just came to the conclusion that Adam was actually making sense and he was actually making more sense than someone I hated on TV that night.” He added, “I guess I eventually realized that, it I really believe this stuff, this isn’t just philosophy anymore, it’s real life.”

In her work on the transition to veganism, McDonald observes that reading represented one way that future vegans “conspicuously and purposefully”⁵⁵ learn more about a given consumptive practice, such as meat-eating. The problem for many freegans, however, was that personal research on one issue—such as the harmful ecological impacts of animal agriculture—invariably led to another—such as the harmful impacts of *all* industrial agriculture. In effect, what freegans faced was an out-of-control spiraling of one issue into another, in which virtually any ethical concern eventually led back to the conclusion that only a total overhaul of society

⁵⁵ (2000:11).

could address a given individual problem. One of Adam's essays on the freegan.info website highlights the almost paralyzing effect that knowledge of the real origins and end-points of commodities—discovered through personal research—could have:

For argument's sake, let's look at vegan Boca Burgers. Freegans see the card-stock wrapper and think of the serene forest erased from the future. They look at the bleached stock and think of the tons of carcinogenic organo-chlorides invading waterways. They note the inner plastic 'freshness seal' and see barrels of petroleum, some as oil spills killing fish and birds, some as climate-changing carbon emissions from the fuel for shipping and factory power, some processed into plastic that will choke our rivers and seas for thousands of years after its one-time use. Freegans remember the deer shot and insects poisoned as 'pests', and the worms, voles and other creatures crushed by the enormous machinery used by modern agribusiness. They remember the farm worker, underpaid and overworked, sending funds home to a country impoverished through imperialism by a government serving the interests of the wealthy corporate elite. They realize that most industrially-produced soy is genetically modified, and that the genetic code of those plants is 'owned' by a corporation. Finally, Freegans realize Kraft Foods bought Boca because it saw the huge profits it could make off people who are trying to eat more healthily and responsibly.

I saw this dynamic play out not just internally but between people over and over again during my fieldwork. One attendee at a freegan event would highlight a problem with one consumptive choice, and propose an alternative. Someone else would interject and point to how that practice, too, would foster exploitation, waste, or environmental degradation of some kind. The

conclusion was nearly always the same: *every* choice a consumer makes within a capitalist society is morally repugnant.⁵⁶

Concurrently, many freegans—at least those who weren’t already “reducers, recyclers, and reusers”—reported a growing awareness of waste, which often started as yet another aspect of capitalism to be concerned about. Annabelle said that she had “always been a bleeding heart liberal” but, in her mid-twenties, read Elizabeth Royte’s *Garbageland*, which follows the “secret trail of trash” through New York City.⁵⁷ Afterward, she said, “I started wondering why I couldn’t compost in my back yard, and I started noticing things about how people were taking care of their municipal waste, and I found it really hard to deal with.” Similarly, Anna told me that—during a period of personal intellectual ferment—she “got really interested in what’s going on with waste.” She had spent an extended period of her life working with a shoe-string theatre troupe in Ecuador, which often prepared props and costumes with found or recovered objects. As she observed, “I’ve collected stuff along the years: old clothing, old jewelry, old stuff, it’s always ended up with me. I’ve either reused that for my plays or for my own stuff, and I kept on thinking, ‘Where does all that stuff in the States go?’” The fact that the answers to these questions were so hard to come by—one manifestation of the fetish of waste—only fuelled their suspicion that something deeper was afoot.

A few freegans claim to have come to the conclusion that recovering waste was a way out of the ethical impasse on their own. Rather than buying “eco-“ or “animal-friendly” commodities, some realized that they could simply recover discarded *ex-commodities* and wash

⁵⁶ Eliasoph (1998:174) also found that, as soon as the usually barriers to open political conversation in American broke down and activists “decided to let seemingly insurmountable problems into the realm of discussable reality,” the result was “they were not sure where to stop.”

⁵⁷ (2005).

their hands of all responsibility for their production. Jordan, a graduate student at NYU, described his enthusiastic embrace of waste recovery:

College was and is a great place to learn to use waste instead of paying for new or used things, because of course there's so much waste around. As I was new to city life and away from home, it was the first time I couldn't easily get my parents to pay for food and furniture combined with the first time I was confronted with refrigerators and dumpsters that were overflowing with usable waste.

Even as soon-to-be freegans were peering past the first fetish of the commodity—which masks the exploitation that goes into production—they were also beginning to see through the *other* fetish—the one which hides waste. Jordan elaborated on one particularly revealing expedition:

There was a relatively empty box set up for students to place their unwanted but still-good food and furniture in, and one-hundred yards away, there was a giant dumpster overflowing with things that should have been in that box. Me and a few frustrated friends began sorting through the dumpster... Where we had expected to find a few dollars worth of things that had been discarded, we found hundreds of dollars of sealed, non-perishable food, cosmetics, medical supplies, furniture, and everything else people fit into college dorms.

Before finding freegan.info itself, though, few viewed these practices of waste recovery as political statements in and of themselves. Instead, they served as ways to make ends meet and live sustainably during the search for efficacious activism, a way of reconciling their growing awareness of the problems with the production of *any* commodity under capitalism with their day-to-day survival needs.

So far, my findings confirm a well-worn conclusion about *who* is likely to become involved in radical social movements. The sociological literature consistently shows that participants in radical social movements tend to have deep, pre-existing involvements in other activist groups.⁵⁸ These involvements cascade, as social connections forged in one movement or organizing setting pull activists into another. My findings, however, offer a slightly different answer to the question of *why* these connections matter. Freegans did not adopt more radical beliefs and more encompassing forms of action because of positive, empowering political experiences that left them wanting more. Nor did connections they created in movements for animal rights or ethical consumption carry them to freegan.info. Instead, freegans looked back on their prior activism with frustration and disillusionment. As Jordan articulated:

Did any of that [my prior political experience] lead me to be an ‘activist?’ What’s an activist? Seems to me that many of the people I know who call themselves that are deeply satisfied in a way I’m not. Not satisfied with society per se, but satisfied with their life and situation because they find their work to improve it to be satisfying.

Through independent research, most freegans came to see capitalism as at the core of the problems they wanted to address. At the same time, freegans were, to varying degrees, building practices of waste reduction and recovery into their lives. The discovery of freegan.info helped freegans pull these diverse threads of their lives together into a form of political action that they saw as efficacious and meaningful.

⁵⁸ The finding that movement participants tend to be those already imbricated in activist social networks and organizations is a robust and recurring one (Dixon and Roscigno 2003; Fernandez and McAdam 1988; Gould 1995; McAdam 1986; Wiltfang and McAdam 1991).

Taking the Freegan Plunge

At some point during their unsatisfying travails through environmental or animal rights activism, each of the individuals I interviewed encountered the term “freeganism.” In many cases, the initial impression was not a positive one. Janet remembers that she first heard about freeganism from a former student, who told her that she had a freegan boyfriend who didn’t work and expected his partner to pay his rent. As Janet perceived it, “freegan” meant “freeloader”: she admitted, “It seemed sort of negative when I first heard it.” Leia agreed with this assessment. Her first experience with a “freegan” was when a friend refused to chip in for the phone service in their shared apartment, citing “freegan” principles that allowed him to use a free phone but not to pay for it.

Something changed, however, when they encountered freegan.info. For over half of the freegans I interviewed, this discovery came through the internet. Sowmya said that she learned about freegan.info while searching for activist groups on meetup.com. She went to the freegan homepage, and, upon seeing the group’s simultaneous denunciation of human, environmental, and animal abuse, thought to herself, “These are all the causes I am so passionate about.” For her:

Freeganism answered a lot of questions. I’ve been involved in a lot of social causes and something was missing in each and every movement. For example, the animal rights movement—PETA, for example—they wouldn’t address environmental issues. And the environmental groups I was involved in wouldn’t acknowledge animal rights. I felt like this was my chance to be involved with something that I know is going to create a change.

Another freegan was similarly excited upon discovering the freegan website: it was “the first group that very clearly linked together all of the individual issues that I had been aware of my whole life and brought them together, tied everything together.” Consistent with other research on the growing importance of the web in activist recruitment,⁵⁹ I found that the internet furnished a way for freegan activists to become aware of the movement without following pre-existing social ties or organizational links. Yet freegan.info’s website only piqued activist’s interest because its critiques of capitalism and of most activism within capitalist society resonated with ideas that freegans had already been developing, slowly, over time.

If the freegan website’s grandiose statements about a total boycott of human, animal, and environmental exploitation were the bait, the first collective dumpster dive was the hook. Although in the next chapter I examine the structure of freegan.info’s “trash tours” in more detail, suffice to say that many freegans—despite their pre-existing awareness of waste and the flaws of the industrial food system—found their visceral encounter with New York’s vast stream of food waste emotionally wrenching. Indeed, dumpster diving remained a morally charged activity long after freegans’ first trash tour, one that served to bring new people into the group as well as to reaffirm the commitments of those already involved.

On one night in January 2012, the group approached a Food Emporium, which was discarding its excess New Year’s Eve-party supplies. The area was an absolute mess, and the bins overloaded with food. As we walked up, Janet halted and exclaimed, “Oh my god, this is going to be outrageous.” And it was: we found immense amounts of meat, produce, flowers, bread, and a wide range of packaged goods. Although the plan for the trash tour was to move quickly between numerous stores, we lingered at the spot long after everyone had taken all that

⁵⁹ (see, e.g., Earl and Kimport 2011; Juris 2008; Langman 2005).

they could possibly carry. When I asked Madeline whether we should move on, she sighed, “It’s like an elephant graveyard. Right now, we’re just here mourning the food.” We had created piles of food on some barrels outside the trash, but ultimately we had to put it back in the trash to avoid the ire of the store’s employees. As we did so, Janet woefully stated, “My heart is really breaking right now.”

In my interviews, I had a chance to probe further into what, specifically, was so emotionally affecting about the trash tour. Most respondents, after all, already were well-aware of the injustices of the economic system in which they lived by the time they found freegan.info. Nevertheless, realizing the extent of the waste that had been hidden from them accented their outrage. Marie explained the emotional power of seeing waste:

Marie: It’s direct. You value food when you see it. You know it’s something that you need, or other people need. For other things, the impact is indirect, if you buy clothes that have been made in another country by children, you know it’s bad but you don’t realize it. But if you throw away food, you know its really bad and you can see it with your own eyes. I was really shocked by the quantity of food.

AB: Even with what you already knew about waste?

Marie: I was as shocked as I was in Montpellier [the first time I dumpster dived]. I am always shocked the same.

AB: Even now you’re not used to it?

Marie: No, I’m not used to it. Every time I see it... I think when you arrive, when you really see all the wasted food, even if the rest of the time we know it exists, when you see it in the dumpster, you have a feeling of being responsible for it. If you’re in front of the

dumpster, you have a choice, to leave it or to save it, to rescue it, in a way. I think there is a feeling of responsibility when you actually dumpster dive.

It is important to qualify that the sight of waste alone rarely turns someone into a freegan: thousands of people have come to a single freegan.info event, been exposed to mounds of ex-commodities, and never returned. The appeal of freegan.info to those who became more consistently involved stemmed from the way that seeing waste affirmed long-standing doubts about other forms of political action, even as recovering ex-commodities pointed to a way forward. Dumpster diving for food waste operated as what Jasper and Nelkin call a “condensing symbol”⁶⁰ that embodied diverse concerns and claims within a single, materially-concrete, symbolically-significant, and ethically-poignant act.

Some—particularly those who had presented a “reducer, recycler, and reuser” narrative—emphasized how the trash tour made them realize how far they could take waste-recovery practices. In 2005, Janet received an e-mail from the Wetlands Activist Collective, which she had become involved in through animal rights activism, that discussed dumpster diving for food. She was incredulous: “Are they really able to eat that way?” When she attended her first freegan.info trash tour, though, she was “hooked from moment one.” As she elaborated:

All my life I’ve been concerned about wasting...What changed and made me more extreme was the discovery that there’s all this food. I think that a lot of people will stop and pick up a lamp on the curbside, with the sign that says ‘Take me’. But it seems like a big step to go to taking food. And I never really believed it was possible to find good things in the garbage on a regular basis.

⁶⁰ (1995:498).

For Janet, dumpster diving for food was a signal to herself and those around her that she cared more about reducing waste and challenging environmental degradation than complying with social norms that painted waste as polluted and valueless. As she defiantly told one assembled group before a dumpster dive:

It is a big step to do something that is repugnant to other people. And this [dumpster diving] certainly is: to open the trash, put your hand in, pull stuff out, and later (or right then) consume it. It is horrifying and disgusting to some people and it will cause them to judge me negatively.

Dumpster diving food was what switched her from having “freegan tendencies” to being a full-fledged “freegan.”

The collective dumpster dive symbolized something else for individuals who had long-since been “radicalized” and were already relying on waste recovery to survive. Lola told me that, for her, finding a group that engaged in politicized waste-recovery *en masse* validated practices in which she’d long been engaged on her own:

Before I heard the term [freegan], I thought it was something not acceptable to do, something I’d hide. People asked where I got something, and I’d say ‘Oh, I bought it.’ But really, I got it for free. Then I heard about freeganism and I got so excited—it all made sense, it was all the stuff I was already doing. I just learned that there are organizations and groups living this life, rather than just me. Just knowing the term ‘freeganism’ has allowed me to be more open about it.

For Leia, dumpster diving with freegan.info reinforced her beliefs about the potential for redistribution of wealth on a massive scale. As she asserted, “freeganism is the most tangible proof I’ve ever seen that we have the resources to socialize the economy. There’s wealth that we

could be distributing to people who need it. There are people that are hungry now, and this is wealth, so let's distribute it."

The idea that freeganism "made sense" was a recurring one, particularly among freegans like Lola who had already been involved in anti-capitalist or anarchist organizing. As Gio described his initial reaction to seeing waste:

I just couldn't wrap my head around that logic: you've spent money on this, you've worked for the money to buy it...It's not just wasted food, it's wasted money, wasted work, there's so much waste in that kind of model. I don't know, that sort of thing just never made sense to me.

In these cases, embracing freeganism was less about a radical change in ideology or everyday practice than it was tying preexisting beliefs and activities to a collective project that made ex-commodity waste its centerpiece.

For freegans who had been "rebellious" without a clear sense that doing so was effective, freeganism was compelling because direct waste recovery felt simultaneously tangible and transformative. Jason had heard about freeganism in college, but thought it "sounded really difficult." He tried dumpster-diving once, but the haul was limited. Looking back at the first tour which he attended in 2008, Jason told me: "The first time I went dumpster diving [with freegan.info], I brought a laundry sack, and I filled it up, and I couldn't even carry it, I had to drag it on the subway. I wanted to just tell everyone: 'Someone just revealed to me the best thing in the world'." What made dumpster diving great, he explained, was not just the free food. It was that it showed him he *could* do something about all of the things he was against, in the here and now, by drawing on the resources of the world around him to build an alternative.

These divergent meanings attached to dumpster-diving and freeganism never entirely converged. Nonetheless, whether they would admit it or not, dumpster-diving for food was the turning point of all of my interviewee's transitions to self-identifying as freegans. It reflected a critical turning point, albeit one that came after a long and gradual process. As Jordan articulated it:

Freeganism never felt like a choice for me. It was the result of many experiences, none of which seemed particularly radical at the time. I think this is how it has to be. The psychological barriers our friends, parents, and marketers erect around trash cans and the halos they put around stores are powerful; they don't dissolve overnight.

For freegans, dumpster diving represented a final rejection of the mode of political action—purchasing “ethical” commodities—in which they had been losing faith for some time. Through meeting their most basic need—food—without spending money, freegans thought they had found a way to reject the diverse manifestations of capitalism that concerned them seemingly at once. By doing so with a group, though, they moved beyond a concern with perfecting their own lifestyles towards a united attempt to challenge capitalism. All of these realizations flowed from seeing the ex-commodities they were confronted with on the trash tour, which unraveled the fetishism of waste that told them that markets are efficient and waste-free.

4. Trash Tours and the Theatre of Anti-Capitalism¹

Based on appearances, Cindy seems to exemplify freegan.info's connection to the "back-to-nature" hippie movements of the 1960s or "deep ecology" direct action movements of the late '80s and '90s. Her long blond hair—occasionally dyed blue or green—is generally pulled back into braids and held under knit caps, making her appear younger than her thirty-two years of age. Many of the beliefs she described to me in our interview similarly fell within a back-to-the-land imaginary. For her, even freegan practices like dumpster diving were a way of getting back to nature—in this case, *human* nature:

Humans are scavengers, I've always identified as that. We are the ravens and the coyotes of the urban environment, and we have a knack for scavenging, and we have a natural knack for not letting things go to waste. As scavengers, we want to crawl into that abandoned building and make it our little nest, and find the food that's being discarded, find that unused patch of ground and make it grow green things. Being a scavenger is to be human in a good way, as opposed to human in a bad way, as our urban society sadly so often represents.

Humans may have their own ecological niche, but as she explained it, the key ideological impetus behind her activism was "all about not putting ourselves above other species," adding, "I'm concerned about insects, I'm concerned about plants, I'm concerned about all that."

Cindy began rebelling against environmental destruction at a young age, when developers started clearing the woods behind her house in a suburb outside Milwaukee. She started by writing letters to the mayor, but said she received no response. Foreshadowing her later

¹ Portions of this chapter were previously published as Barnard (2011).

disillusionment with institutional avenues of politics, she shifted tactics, scheming with her brother to pour sand into the gas tanks of the bulldozers. She insisted she would have gone through with the plan had her mother not found out and put a stop to it.

During college, Cindy went to Wetlands for a social event but wound up becoming involved in the Activism Center. Like many others, she appreciated the way Wetlands linked human, animal, and environmental concerns: “They were unique in that they were involved in multiple issues...animal rights and environmental justice issues. They made the connection between the different things.” Her involvement in Wetlands came with frustrations, too, familiar to those described by other freegans:

You boycott this one company on one issue, and you realize you have to boycott it on two other issues as well. And you just realize, it’s not boycotting one company or another. It’s the system that’s the problem. That was my introduction to realizing that capitalism is the problem.

When freegan.info spun off into a side project of the WAC, she was one of the first to join. A decade later, when I asked her to encapsulate her critique of capitalism, she returned to the interconnections between environmental and other issues: “Any system that puts profit ahead of anything else is going to be a problem and is inherently oppressive. Any system that’s based on limitless growth is not possibly sustainable on a planet with limited resources.”

Each of the past eight years, Cindy has left New York in the early spring to participate in the Buffalo Field Campaign, a project which publicly shames hunters who kill bison straying outside Yellowstone National Park. Cindy openly admits that the campaign is “single issue,” focusing exclusively on protecting one large, charismatic mammal to the exclusion of the broader social and ecological justice issues that concern her. But, as Cindy explained it,

sometimes she simply needs an opportunity to be outside and connect with nature. Given her clear preference for life in Montana over New York, I asked Cindy what brings her back to the city, and she replied, “I don’t want to wait around for civilization to collapse. I don’t want to drop out. That’s what I do in Montana for three months, but then I’ve got to come back.” Like other freegans, Cindy struggled to balance an urban existence with a desire to withdraw from capitalism and live naturally. In reconciling the two, Cindy returned to an activist logic of engagement, arguing that she stayed in the city *precisely* because it was so problematic.

One factor that keeps Cindy coming back is that she claims to have found an effective form of political action dependent on the city itself: freegan.info’s bi-monthly public “trash tours.” By her account, exposing “waste” to trash tour attendees provides a simple, succinct introduction to the problems of capitalism:

Seeing all the waste exposes very clearly the priorities in our society, that making a profit is more important than feeding people, than preserving the environment, than making use of resources, than honoring people’s time, labor, love, and effort. What we see with waste is that once something cannot make money, it is discarded and of no value. It’s left to rot in a landfill and create a new ecological nightmare. It is a single thing that exemplifies very clearly our priorities of our economy and our society—that it’s deemed okay for all these resources to go to waste.

As Cindy sees it, trash tours’ capacity to attract media and outsiders, and convey to them a waste-based indictment of capitalism, make them a compelling form of symbolic protest. The obvious disjuncture between a capitalist system that celebrates efficiency and threatens scarcity yet creates a superabundance of useful waste that is usually hidden is part of why, as Cindy says, “You can’t go home from a trash tour and say ‘Yeah, that’s okay.’ You have to question.” Yet

ultimately, for Cindy, trash tours are not just indirect ways to raise awareness, but also a form of direct action. Freegan.info, she told me, has been “more successful in attracting and bringing in people than any other group of which I’ve been a part” because it “speaks to real needs” and addresses those needs by redistributing ex-commodities.

One night in summer 2008, shortly after she had returned from Montana, Cindy pulled Janet aside and told her, “I have to leave. The waste has just gotten to me. I can’t take it.” She left the tour early, looking overwhelmed by the mountains of wasted food—much of it meat and other animal products—we had found. We all knew, however, that far from dropping out and moving to the countryside, she would be back, having found in trash tours an effective way to put her anti-capitalist politics into practice.

The Sidewalk as Stage

When speaking with the media or newcomers to freegan.info events, participants in freegan.info invariably emphasize that there’s much more to freeganism than dumpster diving. As Adam insisted to me over and over again, “A freegan getting their food from the trash is like a vegan eating tofu. Lots of vegans eat tofu, but not all of them do.” A glimpse at the group’s monthly calendar (Appendix X), however, shows that the vast majority of freegan.info events are dumpster dives, and many of those that are not (like freegan feasts or catering for other activist groups) involve consuming scavenged food. The previous two chapters confirmed the centrality of dumpster diving to freeganism, showing how collective waste reclamation was what distinguished freegan.info at its founding and how participation in dumpster dives was the critical juncture in the long transition to becoming a freegan.

Freegan.info’s “trash tours” started as a way to bring together anarchist activists who were already dumpster diving on their own. They were as much social as political events, with

little clear organization or messaging. However, as the previous chapter illustrated, the group's early trash tours attracted people who were *not* already dumpster diving on their own, *not* previously integrated into the anarchist or direct-action scene, and who did *not* have the same idea about what a trash tour should actually be. Influenced by newcomers like Janet and Madeline, trash tours began to develop a structure that mixed direct action to recover and redistribute wasted food and other ex-commodities with elements of more classic symbolic protest, intended to grab the attention of the public and mass media. The result was a particularly public, almost theatrical, form of waste recovery. It is, as far as I can tell, unique: as one pamphlet written by freegans from outside New York City noted, "freegans, in general, tend to be far less public about what we do"² than freegan.info.

Freegan.info takes advantage of the peculiar way ex-commodities circulate through New York to choose places and times for trash tours that are conducive to public presentation. Accounts of freeganism outside New York describe diving in the "dead of night" from "midnight to 2:30 a.m."³ in an effort to avoid being caught trespassing on store property. By comparison, freegan.info tours generally start between eight and ten p.m. and wrap up before midnight. These more amenable hours make dives late enough that individuals who have jobs can attend, but not so late as to risk a confrontation with city sanitation employees or leave security-conscious attendees on the city streets past midnight.

There is trash all over New York City, so presumably freegan.info could hold most trash tours in Brooklyn or Queens, where a majority of them live. Nonetheless, nearly all events are held in Manhattan in affluent, busy neighborhoods, such as the outskirts of New York

² (Anon n.d.:47).

³ (Donovan 2012:7).

University. Before inviting newcomers to go dumpster diving in a previously unexplored neighborhood, the group first holds a “trash trailblaze” to determine which stores throw away the best food. By doing so, they avoid what happened on the first-ever trash tour: finding genuinely useless garbage. They thus guarantee that when individuals unfamiliar with freeganism join them in a particular area, they will be able to show them a great deal of ex-commodities, including food, clothing, toiletries, or other household items, in a short period of time. In fact, over half of the events I have attended in my years with the group followed a carefully rehearsed route along 3rd Avenue in Murray Hill, Manhattan that brought attendees to two D’Agostino, a Gristedes legendary for throwing out packaged food, and a Dunkin’ Donuts in the space of a few blocks.

My own informal conversations suggest that many people who come to trash tours see themselves as “ethical consumers,” engaged in precisely the kind of neo-liberal activism freegans themselves spurn. The itinerary of trash tours almost guarantees that these commodity-conscious consumers will receive a jolt. Many of the group’s routes stop at Whole Foods or Trader Joe’s—grocery chains that sell organic, vegan, and fair-trade items in abundance, and which produce enormous amounts of waste. Indeed, many freegans speculated that these stores were actually *more* wasteful than their mainstream counterparts, because, in their attempts to appeal to high-end shoppers, they offered a wider range of exotic products and held their goods to more stringent standards.⁴ As Wendy announced outside one Whole Foods, “I ran into a Whole Foods employee a few days ago, and he told me this store throws out about 500 sandwiches and 100 to 200 pounds of prepared food a night. There’s no excuse for this kind of waste.”

⁴ (see, also, Bloom 2010:155; Stuart 2009:13).

Dives themselves are anything but free-for-alls. Before group leaders release trash tour attendees to begin searching the garbage outside of a given store, a representative of [freegan.info](#) welcomes the group and emphasizes a series of unwritten “rules” of dumpster diving.⁵ The first is that individuals deemed to be diving out of necessity take precedence. If the trash tour encounters other dumpster divers, they are allowed to finish first. The second rule is that finds are first offered for group activities, like communal freegan feasts, and can be claimed by individuals only afterward. As Cindy admonished one assembly of around twenty newcomers, “Remember, this is trash. It doesn't belong to you, it doesn't belong to me, it doesn't belong to anyone. So we really should share.” Freegans rarely miss a chance to try to drive home values of communalism and sharing. When a young student asked before a tour if she should put rotten or past-date food back into the trash bag, Janet patiently explained, “Some of us eat things that are a little further gone than others. So don't just make a decision on your own. Think of the bag as belonging to everyone you're diving with.” A final rule is that trash bags should be opened from the top, rather than ripped apart, and that areas in front of stores should never be left a mess. Once again, this rule has emerged from careful calculation: as Janet explained, “In the long term, they [store owners] may be our enemies, but in the short term, we are considerate, because they can make this much harder for us.” Madeline then jumped in, adding, “Generally, we leave the area super, super neat—just with the bags a little bit lighter.”

Anarchists or not, freegans take these rules seriously and consistently remind trash-tour attendees to abide by them. Several times, I've watched [freegan.info](#) participants spend up to a half-hour cleaning up the mess left on the sidewalk by previous divers. During one dive outside

⁵ I once described these as the “rules” of freeganism, but Janet corrected me: freeganism does not have any rules, only dumpster diving does.

the NYU dorms—one of the rare times we were actually in a dumpster—a man came out of the building pushing a trolley filled with trash bags. He started shaking his head as he approached, and when he was within earshot, said in a thick New York accent: “When the truck comes in five minutes, you guys gotta be outta there—and all of that” he said, waving at pile of goods we had created on the sidewalk, “needs to be gone.”

Janet replied, “We know, that’s why we always clean up when we’re done.”

He responded, “And another thing—if one of you gets hurt in there, who do you think is going to have to pay for it?”

Once again, Janet’s response was calm: “Yes, and we’re always very careful.”

He returned a few minutes later with another cart of trash, and walked up to Janet, who was now standing on the sidewalk, and said: “You know, I’m being a nice guy here. I could just call the cops on all of you.”

Janet nodded understandingly, “We know, and we appreciate that.”

He went on: “I don’t want to have to pay some ticket because you all made a total mess. I’ve been spending all morning putting this stuff in there” he said, making a motion as if he were throwing something into the dumpster, “and I don’t want to do it again.”

Janet announced shortly thereafter that she had to leave early, but stated, “Alex is going to be in charge, and he’s going to make sure that everything gets put up back in there, because they can ruin this for us if they want to.”

These rules have a simple strategic logic behind them. The freegan insistence on sharing, for example, is not only a prefigurative projection of freegans’ ideological commitment to non-market systems of distribution. It also ensures that newcomers to the trash tour who are tentative about actually reaching into a bag of garbage will be able to take food items home with them,

and will in turn be able to share those items—and their experiences on the dive—with others who were not present. By being respectful and clean, freegans try to guarantee that they can return to the same places over and over and be assured of finding food. It is also clever from the point of view of presentation, because it allows the freegans to emphasize their opposition to impersonal corporations, rather than small business owners or employees with whom much of the public is broadly sympathetic.

When I asked Madeline why the group was so adamant about its rules, she pointed out, “Well, we actually care about public relations,” adding, with a sigh, “unlike a lot of anarchists.” Indeed, freegans themselves see their trash tours as structured, almost scripted, performances. Janet is freegan.info’s most reliable trash-tour leader: in over fifty tours I’ve gone on with the group, she’s attended every single one. Standing in an atrium at the entrance to Columbia University before one tour, Janet explained to the assembled group of around thirty-five people how she saw the event in educational terms:

When I do this [dumpstering] on my own, no one stops or says anything...I just felt like, well, there’s still more, because my own personal actions were good, but they weren’t affecting enough people. But when I joined the freegan group, I realized, well, here we’re able to do something that’s educational...It does sometimes feel like acting. I know that when I’m doing this alone, it has a different feeling. When we do this together, it feels like a party.

Christian even occasionally came to dumpster dives in costume, wearing recovered employee uniforms for the stores where the group was dumpster diving or an orange construction vest. In his view:

We're trying to make freeganism sexy and more appealing...make people look good.

We're dumpster diving, we're dirty, we have clothes that are hand-me-down or trash clothes. But if we put a little more effort into it, care about how we look, we can make it a lot more appealing.

The notion that a social movement would try to make their events “appealing” and “educational” may seem intuitive. Nonetheless, as scholars of anarchist movements have noted, many contemporary anti-capitalists put little stock into these kinds of appearances, assuming instead that direct action will spread like a “contagion” with little overt efforts at recruitment.⁶

Freegan.info's approach reflected the cross-fertilization of its founders with newcomers like Janet and Madeline who were more overtly concerned about putting on a good show and making a positive impression.

Guerrilla Redistribution and a Bonanza of Bagels

While individuals dumpster diving for food is a common sight in New York City, twenty people doing so together is not. As such, it is difficult for pedestrians not to take notice of a freegan.info trash tour. Anyone who stops is likely to be confronted by Adam, who typically came to tours laden with freegan pamphlets (printed on the clean side of paper rescued from recycling bins, of course) and clipboards of sign-up sheets for the group's e-mail lists. One night, when Adam paused his evangelizing to grab some food, he shoved some literature into my hands and said, “The masses are walking by—educate them.”

Part of what makes a trash tour different from a more ordinary street protest, though, is that freegans approach bystanders not just with flyers and movement literature but also ex-commodities themselves. During one event that Janet dubbed the “freegavaganza,” the group

⁶ (see Graeber 2009; Katsiaficas 2006).

split up into teams of two, fanned out throughout the city to dive, and, at a predetermined time, returned to Union Square. As freegans slowly trickled back in, they built a mound of recovered goods: some people found produce and bread, while others brought shoes, make-up, a box of condoms, and a functioning vacuum cleaner.

The group then began pushing the items on nearby pedestrians, turning a culture of acquisitiveness on its head by using the allure of free stuff to convince people to stop and talk. Anyone who paused to examine an item was subsequently told that it came from the trash. They were, in effect, forced to confront the fetishism of waste head-on: individuals could either take an item for free, and thus acknowledge that not all waste is polluted and useless, or leave it, and thus ignore the use value that they could hold in their hands and see with their own eyes. Either way, the freegavaganza was both *directly* and *materially* challenging capitalism, by redistributing free goods and reducing people's need for the market, and *symbolically* critiquing it by undermining the cultural norms and fetishism that keep people buying new things despite the ex-commodified wealth around them.

Usually, freegans' redistributive efforts are more opportunistic and ad-hoc. In one instance, Christian grabbed a loaf of bread and some avocados, planted himself on the sidewalk, and started handing sandwiches to unsuspecting pedestrians. Most were caught too off-guard to do anything but take them. On another night, the group found an extraordinarily large number of boxes of un-expired Mallomars, disgustingly saccharine marshmallow and chocolate cookies. Janet started calling out to startled pedestrians, "Wait, wait, these are for you" and shoving boxes of sweets into their hands when they halted in confusion. (Adam was skeptical of this strategy, owing to the cookies' questionable nutritional content. When I pointed out that people seemed

quite happy to be getting free junk food, he noted, “We could give out crack vials too, and that’d make people very happy.”)

One particularly memorable evening—January 18th, 2008, to be exact—the group was diving outside Balducci’s, a chain so notorious for its high quality garbage that freegans had dubbed it the “food museum.” Suddenly, Cindy cried out: “Holy shit,” and the attendees rapidly encircled her to view two overflowing garbage bags brimming with packets of organic, fair trade coffee. At \$12.99 a bag, there was easy \$1,000 worth of coffee in front of us—far more than the eight people on this “trash trailblaze” could hope to consume. So Cindy suggested, “Just take as much as you can carry it. Give it away. Coffee is something that people buy and it’s a horrible, destructive crop.” Janet turned to a pair of skeptical-looking newcomers and said, “Go on the subway and tell people ‘This store had so much they were throwing it out.’ Don’t say, ‘I got it out of the garbage.’ Tell them ‘It’s past date, are you afraid?’ But no one is afraid of past-date coffee.” She then walked towards the nearest subway station laden with coffee.

Of course, hundreds of dollars worth of coffee or fifty boxes of Mallomars is not the usual take from a freegan.info trash tour. Instead, what the group finds most consistently is fruit, vegetables, and baked goods. The quantities of the latter category are so reliably enormous⁷ that there is even a song circulating in the anarchist community that celebrates subsisting off of them:

They have wasted untold millions and they waste more every day /

While the workers keep producing, they keep throwing it away /

But the freegans are uniting and we vow to never pay /

⁷ Bloom (2010:177) also finds that bread and baked goods are among the most commonly wasted foods at supermarkets, although according to Buzby et al. (2014:12) the overall loss of grain products at consumer and retail levels (31%) is consistent with the average across all types of food.

For the donuts make us strong.⁸

Freegans themselves caution against being enticed by the ease of an all-pastry diet. Still, there's no questioning the items' allure. Most bakeries throw out their entire stock at the end of the day, and typically place all their food items together in a single bag. Even reluctant trash-tour attendees rarely can resist reaching into a clean trash bag to grab a muffin, bagel, or donut—often still warm. Marie once proudly told me, “With all the Dunkin Donuts in New York, I can decide which flavor of muffin I want to eat, and go out and find one in five minutes.” I’ve never been on a trash tour where we couldn’t find bagels if we wanted them.

I suggested two chapters ago that the combination of over-production and commodification makes waste inevitable. But I didn’t talk about *where* or *how* food waste happens. Once again, there is something self-evidently paradoxical about waste on such a fantastic scale. Food retailing is an incredibly competitive business: with more and more stores like Wal-Mart entering the grocery market, and more people eating out, sales at traditional grocery stores have actually *declined* in the last decade.⁹ Even those that do still make money post, after taxes, a measly 1.84% profit.¹⁰ Baked goods are a particularly confusing kind of ex-commodity, because there are no long supply chains or complicated logistics involved in getting them to the shelves. Most stores produce their baked goods on-site or nearby, so why not simply produce a little less and *not* throw out dozens of loaves of bread and racks of cupcakes every night? Why, to put it another way, does capitalism make so much cake?

The freegans have developed their own explanation for the inevitable baked-good bonanza. As one e-mail bouncing across the freegan.info list-serve explained it:

⁸ (Botha 2004:100).

⁹ (Martinez 2007:20).

¹⁰ (Bloom 2010:149).

Pizzerias, bakeries, bagel and doughnut shops discard all of their wares on a daily basis, and remake everything the next day. Because they charge so much more for goods than their cost to make them, they'd rather have too much food and discard a great deal of it than risk losing sales. While the food is still perfectly edible at the end of the day, they prefer to discard it, write it off on their taxes as spoilage, and make everything again the next day, so they can brag to consumers that they are getting their bread or pizza or doughnuts fresh from the oven.

One bakery chain, Au Bon Pain, actually explicitly permits its stores to have \$80 in inventory at closing time to ensure that their shelves never go bare.¹¹ As this policy suggests, stores are fearful that any customer leaving unsatisfied will go to their competitors and thus hedge against this possibility by keeping their shelves full up until the last minute. Adam raged, "This logic is taken to the point of complete absurdity with many retailers discarding on a daily basis many times the actual quantity of goods sold on the off chance that a customer may walk in one day with a request for, say, 500 bagels."

This logic of never-miss-a-sale extends beyond just baked goods. Stores try to increase their share of the finite amount that gets spent on food by promising freshness and offering a huge array of choices. In an era where agricultural subsidies and technological advances have made the raw materials of our food system—that is, the food itself—unprecedentedly cheap, stores can deliberately over-stock and make up for waste with the margin on the items they do sell. One night, Janet contemplated a box of Nilla Wafers within its sell-by date before announcing to the crowd: "They're over-ordering so that they can have abundance in their stores

¹¹ (Bloom 2010:138).

so that shoppers will never say, ‘Oh, they don’t have Cheerios today.’ They’ll always have Cheerios because they have too much. And they’re throwing it away.”¹²

According to freegans’ sidewalk theorizing, though, grocery stores create so many ex-commodities in part because they’re selling more than just food. As Janet elaborated:

It’s not just a problem that, ‘Oops, we have a little extra.’ That wouldn’t be the reason that you’re seeing something like this [referring to the box]. It’s a deliberate effort to overstock their shelves so there can always be—especially in the beautiful, giant chains—a sense of abundance. The shopper has this feeling of well-being walking through the aisles and seeing abundance wherever they go. And so they want to buy more.

As Adam explained, “On the surface, it would seem that stores would seek to curtail ordering if they consistently have an overabundance of goods. The reasons they do not do this are revealing. Retail establishments are selling not only specific products, but the store itself.”

Janet went on to postulate that waste was a necessary by-product of stores trying to project limitless choice, quality, and supply. This interpretation was supported by none other than the president of Trader Joe’s, who explained to the Harvard Business Review, “The reality...is, if you see a store that has really low waste...you are worried. If a store has low waste numbers it can be a sign that they aren’t fully in stock and that customer experience is suffering.”¹³ The seemingly lunatic yet inexorable conclusion from this statement is that even in a world of perfectly efficient markets and omniscient store managers, stores would still prefer

¹² Managers interviewed by Mena et al. (2011:652) explicitly admitted to systematically over-ordering to maintain full shelves.

¹³ (Alvarez and Johnson 2011).

not to sell everything on hand every day, since unsightly empty shelves could disrupt the “customer experience.”

The frenetic scramble for increased market share creates ex-commodity waste in other ways as well. Freegans often oscillate between laughter and sadness when they encounter absurd new flavors of oreos—within their sell-by date and still-packaged—in the garbage, mingling with obscure flavors of coffee creamer and yogurt pots in strange new shapes. Although it’s hard to “invent” truly new food, grocery stores and distributors nonetheless introduce nearly 19,000 new products a year.¹⁴ By the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s classification, though, 95% of these products are “not innovative” and “offer a fresh image rather than truly novel benefits.”¹⁵ Not coincidentally, 90% of them “fail”¹⁶—which, as freegans discover, often means they wind up in the trash.

Sometimes, the ex-commodities freegans find on a trash tour appear to have made their way to the garbage out of sheer negligence or as a result of accident. Boxes containing eleven sticky bottles of olive-oil are an infrequent but celebrated discovery. Gio proffered his explanation for this very specific yet recurring find: “A store orders a box of twelve bottles of X. One is broken. The store is playing for twelve, they’re not going to take eleven, so it just gets thrown out. We see that with eggs all the time: one is broken, and they throw out the dozen.” Adam speculated that increased automation of supermarket stocking systems also played a role. As he observed, “Computerized ordering by remote corporate offices often means that stores are shipped more foods than they have space for and discard goods as soon as they reach the store.

¹⁴ (Martinez 2007:33). This is higher than the rate of introduction for non-food products, which appears to support the notion that food retailing is a particularly competitive business.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Thus, much of what is in the trash is actually FRESHER than what is on the store shelves.”¹⁷ As Janet pointed out before handing off her box of Nilla wafers, though, most of the waste freegans encounter seems too systematic and too reliable to be an accident: “It’s not just this store. It’s not just this chain. It’s not just this neighborhood. It’s not just this night. It could be on any night if you check it out on your own and see for yourself.”

Stores, of course, invariably reply that they offer unlimited abundance and choice and fresh-baked goods because that’s what consumers want. The failure of so many new products, however, “suggests that the food industry is not responding to consumer demand, but rather blindly offering consumers sets of repackaged, reformulated, and reengineered products in hopes that a few of these products will turn out to boost corporate profits.”¹⁸ Even if we *do* believe stores are just giving consumers what they want, there’s no question of who pays for a business model aimed at succeeding in a competitive market by taking cheap ingredients and re-packaging them into high-priced commodities: consumers. A source no less radical than the U.S. Comptroller General concluded that “consumers ultimately bear the cost of losses in the form of higher prices.”¹⁹ The freegan.info website presents a more thorough analysis:

Consumers subsidize this waste not only through the stores’ escaping their tax burden using waste as a write-off, but also by high retail prices. As waste is factored as a cost of doing business, the expense is being passed on to the consumer in the retail price of everything we buy. The fact that stores consider such massive waste economically

¹⁷ This theory is at least partly supported by Mena et al. (2011).

¹⁸ (Lyson and Raymer 2000:206).

¹⁹ (1977:46). Buzby et al. (2014:iii) also conclude that food waste raises prices.

justifiable...is suggestive of the massive gap between actual cost of the goods we buy and the profit margin added to their retail prices.²⁰

The vast majority of people don't realize that the commodities they see on the shelves of a supermarket or in the display case of a bakery are shadowed by nearly identical ex-commodities outside in garbage bags. Yet, as freegan trash tours expose, the two are inextricably linked. The constant introduction of new products, over-production to never miss a sale, and insistence on projecting an illusion of abundance are ways that stores add exchange value to cheap foodstuffs.²¹ Every one of them, however, rests on the direct or indirect destruction of use value through waste.

Putting Trash on Camera

Passer-bys are not the only witnesses to ex-commodification on freegan.info trash tours: reporters are a nearly-ubiquitous presence of trash tours. At least since the 1960s, the mass media has played an increasingly significant role in certifying social movements as legitimate (or illegitimate) political actors, conveying (or silencing) social movement claims, and helping (or hindering) movements in their search for new activists or resources.²² Not all activists are happy about the power the media has acquired over them: Graeber reports that anarchists "tend to abhor the corporate media" and rarely attempt to frame their events to garner television or print

²⁰ <http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-philosophy/freeganism-waste-and-the-ideology-of-the-product/>

²¹ Nestle (2002:17) finds that 80% of the price of food is for labor, packaging, advertising, and other "value-adding" activities.

²² (see, e.g., Andrews and Caren 2010; Della Porta and Diani 2006; Gitlin 1981).

coverage.²³ One reporter trying to speak to dumpster-divers found that many refused to speak to her because of her corporate affiliations.²⁴

At the same time, some of these same anarchist groups have sought to “be the media” themselves, turning movement messaging—often via the internet and social media—into a form of direct action that prefigures a post-capitalist news system.²⁵ At least in principle, freegan.info celebrates do-it-yourself, not-for-profit media outlets like Indymedia, which grew out of the anti-globalization protests of the 1990s and early 2000s. Yet there’s no denying that freegan.info’s most significant exposure to the general public has come through mainstream outlets. As Janet told one group of trash-tour attendees during her welcome speech in 2007:

Apparently we’re fascinating to the media, probably you’ve seen us on something. We’ve been on radio, television, newspapers, magazines and next up, Oprah... We’ve been amazingly popular. We don’t solicit. They just come and they keep checking us out and following us.

At every single event I observed that the group had dubbed “open to media,” journalists of one kind or another—from college students writing final papers to professional filmmakers—were present. The freegans’ own media database lists several hundred stories published in dozens of countries. On one tour, for example, we were joined by a film crew from Spain, two writers for a magazine in Norway, and a freelance photographer from the Netherlands. The instance suggested that there is some truth to the freegan joke that they have been covered by “just about every country rich enough to send a film crew.”

²³ (2009:438).

²⁴ (Essig 2002).

²⁵ (Juris 2008; Moore and Roberts 2009).

The mainstream media was present at freegan.info's inception, and the development and expansion of the group has been indelibly linked to this ongoing coverage. Wendy recalled a PBS crew asking Wetlands activists where they did their dumpster diving. At the time, "taking cameras with us was a big deal, because before that, dumpster diving had been a big secret." She said that the media attention exploded in 2004, when a student who had attended one of the first trash tours sold his story to *Newsday*. As Adam observed, "It was obvious from the beginning that the media was going to be all over us." He was right. By 2006, the group was fielding more than a dozen media requests a week, and the freegans began implementing strict rules about where and when the media could film or interview them.²⁶

Perhaps owing to his rootedness in the anarchist community, Adam was derisive of the coverage, sure that the reporters were only interested in portraying freegans as "weirdoes with garbage." No doubt the breaking of a social taboo around contact with waste—rather than an anti-capitalist message—drew the media to freegan.info. Notwithstanding much of the coverage's weak political content, though, freegan.info's capacity to garner media attention with little effort proved irresistible, especially to activists who were accustomed to having to perform elaborate stunts to get coverage. As Cindy admitted:

In the days of direct action campaigning [with Wetlands], we were locking ourselves to doors and dropping banners off of skyscrapers to get the *Daily News* to cover a story about the environment. And here, all of the sudden, a national news outlet came to us [freegan.info], and said 'Hey we're interested in what you're doing!' and that was a shock to us.

²⁶ (Ernst 2009:110).

Ultimately, even Adam could not say no, admitting: “I’m not as worried about them [the mainstream media] portraying us as crazy as I am worried about them just ignoring us.”

Others who came to the group later were far more comfortable with making interaction with the media an explicit part of freegan.info’s strategy. Janet has been the object of scores of magazine articles and television bios, which invariably emphasize the contrast between her career as a schoolteacher and the radicalism of her freegan beliefs. She had no trouble justifying her seemingly inexhaustible willingness to talk to reporters:

The reason that we’re interested in going on camera is not for personal gain but really to spread the message. We’re only reaching people one at a time if we only tell them word of mouth. So this way, we open up not just a few individuals’ minds, people passing by, and people on our trash tour. We want to show everybody how much waste there is and why there’s so much waste, and what the problem is with that.

Janet thus brought with her to the group a fairly conventional conception of the value of the media: a medium to raise awareness and bring freeganism to a broader audience.

The willingness of the freegan.info group to talk to the media set it aside from other freegan groups, and was almost certainly the main reason why their organization has received comparatively more attention.²⁷ Janet will even organize private dives with reporters who can’t make freegan.info events. One time, she said, she took a film crew behind a Laundromat in the dead of winter to collect excess detergent, with the aim of showing them that freegans could get more than just food from the garbage. She described shivering uncontrollably as she slowly

²⁷ As Janet noted, “We’re probably the most organized freegans in the world, because we’re really willing to talk to the media.”

poured near-frozen detergent into a single container—all to demonstrate that freegans are able to meet a wide range of needs through waste.

In my time with them, freegan.info never actively *solicited* the media by sending a press release for an event. Still, as Janet’s story suggests, the freegans’ efforts to accommodate journalists often reach absurd lengths. A Japanese media crew asked for a group representative to be interviewed by a puppet, a request that seemed bizarre but to which Jason eventually grudgingly agreed. For her part, Janet once told the story of a French media crew that followed one freegan home after a trash tour. The crew asked him if they could film him the next morning. The freegan, trying to avoid being hassled further, said that he could not let them do that, because he had to wake up early to go to work. The French crew insisted, though, and came at 6:30 a.m. to film him preparing a (dumpster-dived) bagel, putting on a tie, and going into the subway. As it turned out, that freegan was actually unemployed, but had wanted to show the media that freegans could have “normal” lives despite dumpster diving.

Even as they accommodate the media, freegan.info participants also aggressively work to shape the way the movement is portrayed. Before events, one person is designated the “media wrangler,” whose main job is to prevent the media from interviewing anyone who hasn’t been schooled in the group’s main talking points. Quinn, in a 2012 interview after he left the group, ruminated that:

I liked that there was a media focus. They [freegan.info] had a line. They had scripted interactions, and they had media trainings for members. At other places, I’ve seen an aversion to working with the media. But they took that head-on. There was also a centrality to it. It’s an anarchist idea that everyone gets to say what they want, but

freegan.info has a united front to the media, which I liked, even if we were taught to personalize it.

At one “media training” for freegan.info spokespeople, Adam stated that he felt the group should pre-approve media questions, provide appealing stock footage rather than allowing outlets to shoot their own images, ask to see quotes before they were printed, and turn down media requests from organizations that were likely to provide unfavorable coverage. He added that the group needed to think about how it framed its messages. For example, instead of “disposable,” which implied “convenience,” the group should describe the commodities they encounter in the garbage as “shoddily made.” The discussion of presentation then transitioned to a discussion of positive versus negative language, particularly with respect to “alternatives to capitalism” versus “anti-capitalist.” As Janet argued, “There are a million different ways to talk about all the issues related to capitalism without ever coming out as explicitly against capitalism, which causes people to just seize up.”

Another way that freegan.info controls media images is through its strictly enforced rule against eating in front of cameras during trash tours. When outside observers are not present and the freegans are in what Goffman would call the social “backstage,”²⁸ freegan.info participants eat straight from the trash with relish, often holding long conversations about group strategy while clustered around a grocery-store compost bin. In some cases, freegan trash tours even become impromptu feasts. One night, when the sole cameraman present wandered off with Adam, Janet found a watermelon and sliced it, handing it to people who were already chowing on melted soy ice cream Evie had just discovered. When the cameraman started walking back towards us, Janet admonished me to stash the ice cream and wipe the residue from my face. If

²⁸ (1959:112).

that cameraman or any other media outlet wanted to see freegans eating discarded food—and they usually do—they had to come to a freegan feast, where the food hds been carefully cleaned and prepared. Thus, the media and its viewers must confront the reality of waste fetishism: that, aside from having once been bagged-up and put on the curb, the ex-commodities freegans consume are virtually indistinguishable from commodities purchased at a store.

It is difficult to evaluate what impact this surprising surfeit of media coverage has had on public perceptions of freeganism or in diffusing their critique of capitalism. There were moments, however, when both the impacts and challenges of an anti-capitalist group engaging with capitalist media became accentuated. In 2008, celebrity talk-show host Oprah Winfrey invited one member of the group to be interviewed for a special on the topic of “How far would you go to live your beliefs?” The organization went through a lengthy and acrimonious debate about whether it was ecologically unsound and unprincipled to fly someone to Chicago for an appearance on a corporate-sponsored television show. Ultimately, the group opted to send Madeline, due to her work experience in communications. While walking to one trash tour before her appearance, she defended the decision, noting, “It’s hard to argue with that level of exposure. And I’ve been inspired at times by things I saw in the mainstream media. You just have to leave out the language of lefty magazines, like ‘anarchism’ or ‘commodification’.”

While Oprah herself did not attend a freegan.info dive, she sent a proxy. During the trash tour they filmed, Madeline explains, “It’s not toxic waste,” after which the reporter observes, “The food is still in its original packaging and has been discarded largely for cosmetic reasons, not because of poor quality.” The reporter’s conclusion is a surprisingly critical one:

Freegans believe that, in a way, we are slaves to buying. When you think about it, we work so hard, but for what? To buy more. Whether it’s a house payment or a car or food,

we just want to continue to consume. Freegans have decided to kind of try and turn their back on it completely and stop buying stuff.

Certainly, “anti-capitalism” gets slighted in Oprah’s coverage, which presents waste as a result of individual actions and a problem that can be solved with personal choices. Nonetheless, by talking about the pointlessness of consumption and how much economic activity results in little more than just waste, it at least nods to core freegan messages. As far as the group was concerned, to expose the abundance of ex-commodities and challenge the ceaseless drive to consume more—as the report does—was to chip away at the material and cultural foundations of capitalism (even if doing so was far from Oprah’s intention).

In terms of trash tour attendance, the impact of the appearance was undeniable.²⁹ Before showing the clip of the “trash tour”—with Madeline sitting by her side, wearing a prim purple suit-jacket and pearls—Oprah quipped, “If you’re watching, I know you’re not going to go on a trash tour after this show.”

“You might, you’ll be shocked when you see this,” the reporter replied.

On this count, Oprah was wrong. Shortly after the story, a stream of middle-aged women with limited prior histories of political engagement started coming to freegan.info events. The story’s impact may not be measurable only in New York: one avid dumpster-diver I interviewed in Phoenix told me, “I never would have thought about it [dumpster diving], but I saw the show and thought ‘If Oprah says it’s okay, it must be okay.’”

²⁹ The fact that an appearance on Oprah would have a significant impact should surprise no one. In 1996, Oprah stated—in response to reports about mad cow disease—that the information “just stopped me cold from eating another burger” (qtd. in Mauer 2002:66). The livestock industry sued her as prices for cattle futures plummeted.

If the story's consequences for awareness about freeganism were clear, its political outcome was more questionable. One night in 2008, the group was joined by an older Dutch woman who told me she had seen the freegans on Oprah and had "come all the way from Holland to see us" so she could "get this started in my own country."

I pushed the woman for more detail: "You came all the way here to see freegan.info?"

"Well, and to go shopping on Sachs Fifth Avenue," she admitted.

At the end of the tour, she came up to me and said, "I'm so moved." She added after a few seconds, "But are freegans still allowed to buy nice things?" Her response indicated how easily the spectacle of dumpster diving could be divorced from its political content.

The anti-capitalist implications of freeganism were not lost on everyone, though. On another night, I spoke with a middle-aged woman wearing a stained Disney sweatshirt. She said she had come to New York from South Carolina to visit a sick friend, but had remembered that the freegans she saw on Oprah were in the city, and wanted to check them out. She opened the bags with relish, and gushed with enthusiasm about the quantities and quality of food. Her gusto for acquiring ex-commodities made me think that her impetus for coming was free stuff. Nonetheless, after the "Waving the Banana" speech, I overheard her talking to a pedestrian, who had asked her what was going on. "All this waste is due to capitalism," she stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

Engaging with the media is far from the kind of "direct action" or "prefigurative politics" that was originally at the core of freegan.info's politics. It has, however, been effective in exposing America's largely hidden waste stream to a wide audience, even if those stories rarely connect the waste back to capitalism. Moreover, it has brought people to the group who might

otherwise never have had the networks and contacts that direct-action groups often rely upon for recruitment. I consider the media coverage's downsides more fully in the final chapter.

“Waving the Banana” and Anti-Capitalism 101

To an outside observer, a group of people gathering food from the trash does not automatically register as a critique of capitalism; if anything, it shows a lifestyle *dependent* on capitalism. For many direct-actionists and anarchists, however, the way that the broader public interprets their actions is irrelevant. What matters is the action itself.³⁰ In his ethnography of anarchist events—from street parties to protests—in New York City, Graeber concludes that “one could easily attend the whole action start to finish without having the slightest idea what it was supposed to be about.”³¹

The emphasis freegan.info put on “messaging” thus contrasted with the anarchist norm, and reflected the diverse previous political experiences of its participants. Still, the question of whether trash tours should be “educational” was a source of disagreement from the start. Jason explained his own perspective on the topic:

I don't think it's good for people to hear about various activities like dumpster diving without really learning some of the facts about environmental destruction or taking a serious look at sustainability and climate change and things like that. I think if you don't learn about those things at the same time, then your efforts aren't really coming from the right place. You're probably not going to be that into it, and later something else will distract you.

³⁰ The Occupy Wall Street movements' General Assemblies, for example, were frequently criticized for their inefficiency in planning actions or making decisions. But from a direct action perspective, the outcomes of the assemblies were no more important than the assembly itself, as time-consuming consensus processes were itself prefigurative of a directly democratic society.

³¹ (2009:391).

Eventually, the group moved away from a pure direct-action logic and concluded that attendees *did* need to leave with some take-away “message.” In response to an influx of newcomers with divergent understandings of what freeganism was all about, in 2009 freegan.info began to hold “Freeganism 101s” prior to its trash tours.

The most common questions people asked, and freegans’ stock responses to them, are revealing. At one event—held in the indoor seating area of a Whole Foods Supermarket—Madeline opened by stating, “We’re here tonight to take a long, hard look at capitalism.” Yet the attendees, by and large, were interested in more practical issues. Indeed, at all of the freeganism 101s I attended, someone always posed each of three questions: is there really so much waste, why don’t stores donate the food, and does anyone ever get sick? These questions reveal the powerful hold of the fetishism of waste, which reflect the presumption that waste is minimal, inevitable, and valueless. These questions fit with my own impression that most people came to trash tours with a sense that any food that was still good would be donated and that any food thrown out was in reasonably bad shape.

After a few minutes on the streets, though, these preconceptions were inevitably challenged. Attendees were confronted with mounds of food that was neither useless nor polluted, but virtually indistinguishable from the food on sale a few feet away behind grocery stores’ windows. As one African-American teenager commented, “I thought there was nothing in those bags—but Madeline, she schooled me!” Even outside of stores that publically announce they give their surplus to charity, waste is present in abundance. Two hip-looking twenty-somethings wearing tight pants and denim jackets paused next to one trash tour and queried: “Wait... don’t stores donate that stuff?” As freegans are quick to point out, stores often defend the decision *not* to donate by citing liability concerns, even though they are shielded from

lawsuits by the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act and no store has ever been sued for giving away its surplus.³² A question about donations thus leads to a quick introduction into the fact that stores in a capitalist economy exist to make money, not feed people.

These inescapable observations—that there is a lot of waste, most of it isn’t bad, and it’s not making it to the hungry—are basic, but, as I just suggested, they create openings for freegans to connect waste back to capitalism. The most important moment of the trash tour for drawing these linkages is the “Waving the Banana” speech, which is given near the end of every tour on which there are newcomers.³³ Partly, the speech serves to give freegans an opportunity to talk about freegan practices *other* than dumpster diving and to invite attendees to other events. More importantly, though the speech is a platform for explaining freegans’ anti-capitalist ideology. One night, speaking to a group of twenty-five people, with two camera crews straining to film her at a good angle, Leia announced:

Here we're seeing all of this waste that is produced by the capitalist system, which is a system that exploits the earth, exploits workers, exploits resources, and all these products get onto the shelf...It's really sad to see all the stuff going into the trash, thinking about all the workers that are underpaid to make all of this stuff. People don't consider the value behind the labor that goes into these producing these things. People don't think of the value in terms of the actual taxation it causes on the earth.

³² In one survey, 67% of retailers cited liability reasons for not donating, while 17% blame regulations (Food Waste Reduction Institute 2013:17), even though there are no liability reasons or government regulations that prevent donation and a plethora of laws and tax incentives that encourage them to do so.

³³ The speech is only given by long-time freegan.info members; newer, less experienced participants must practice giving the speech on nights when the media is not present.

Her opening remarks pointed to the first, classic fetish of the commodity: that the goods we buy are the product of social and ecological exploitation. She quickly moved, however, to the fetish of waste, meditating the notion that objects labeled “waste” actually lack value:

It’s really interesting if you look at the way we relate to the products we get from stores.

Even though we just got it out of the trash, it’s very useful stuff, it’s yummy, it’s nutritious, but in this system that we live in, all of this stuff is considered to have no value as soon as it’s put in the trash. When you go into the store and you buy it, it’s like, we’re trained to think that in that moment value is placed in it...and obviously that’s not true.

It’s a really fine line: it’s valuable when it’s put into a white plastic bag, and not valuable when it’s put into a black, big ugly bag and put on the side of the street.

She then transitioned to discussing the direct-action praxis of dumpster diving, which asserts that recovering ex-commodities allows freegans to live ethically even within a capitalist society:

We’re here to reclaim all this, because we view this as wealth...We’re actually living amongst massive amounts of wealth, and until we actually reclaim it and share it with everybody around us, everything is going into the trash. Meanwhile, we have an opportunity to live in abundance. It’s all actually there, we’re just trained to think that it’s only valuable if it came from a store.

Leia closed by evoking a strong moral, quasi-religious condemnation of waste, and suggested that freeganism was the true way to live up to widely shared values:

So I say we all take all the stuff that we find and give it out to people, share it, and put the value back into it. It’s really there. And also it’s paying homage to all those people that work to make all the food, and pay homage to the lives that go into this. To me it’s sort of like saying ‘grace’, in a way. It’s a spiritual thing for me.

By the time she finished talking, the crowd around her had nearly doubled.

The “waving the banana” speech is made that much more compelling by the way freegans use the physical ex-commodities themselves as props to support their message. Before the speech begins, the speaker instructs those who are diving to pile up the goods they find on the sidewalk in a display, rather than simply stashing them in their bags. As Adam jokingly described it, this is done for “propaganda purposes”: particularly tasty, rare, or expensive items are arrayed in the front of the display, and the display is left up as long as the media is still taking pictures. If the haul is poor at one site, the group moves on and gives the speech elsewhere. Adam was particularly adept at taking the particular ex-commodities we found and connecting them to current events. “If you’re wondering why 100,000 people in Southeast Asia died in a Tsunami [in 2004]” he stated, holding up a package of shrimp, “It’s because mangrove forests are being cut down to create shrimp farms.”³⁴ He gave another speech in 2007, as debates about immigration reform raged in Washington, D.C. He lifted a shrink-wrapped piece of Styrofoam containing two corn-cobs, “And if what worries you are ‘illegal immigrants’, you might ask why we’re subsidizing corn and sending it to Mexico.”

Through its engagement with the media, public and performative direct action, and careful use of props, freegan.info billed itself as “the friendly face of anti-capitalism” in New York City. As should be clear, this image was something that the group cultivated over time. The “waving the banana” speech involved a lot more “waving” when it started: now, as one freegan explained, it is more like a “holding the banana” speech that avoids polemical themes such as anarchism or primitivism and offers a host of facts and statistics. The speech is emblematic of

³⁴ For more on ecological conflicts in the developing world related to shrimp production, see (Martinez-Alier 2002).

how freegan.info tried to walk a fine line between expressing members' self-identifications as radical activists while simultaneously bringing in newcomers who might not share that identification. As Cindy explained:

We've been very clear about being against capitalism, and anyone coming on our tours hears that. But we're not saying we're anarchists necessarily. We talk to people one on one, and we'll say, 'Yeah, a lot of people are anarchists.' But the group isn't officially anarchist. Anarchists in black masks breaking things scare people.

Even the most ideologically extreme participants in the group usually managed to make freeganism seem eminently reasonable over the course of a speech. Jason motioned to the display one night and announced:

We always just stockpile all the food we find and we just look at it. This big cornucopia could sustain all of us for quite a while... The reason [this food] get[s] to the supermarket is, let's be honest, not to feed any of us. That's not the purpose, otherwise it wouldn't be in the garbage. The purpose of this was to get us to put it into a cart and go up to the register and get us to exchange money so the people that own this grocery store can get a little bit richer.

He then turned to the common-sense notion that quality food should not be wasted:

Conservative estimates put one-third of our food in this country going to waste, and that is completely insane considering that one in seven children in this city—not just all over other parts of the world, but in this *city*—go to bed hungry. What sense does it make that we're finding all this food in the trash? Does that make sense? No, it doesn't.

Jason was right. For most people, the presence of edible, clean food in the trash—rather than a donation bin—*doesn't* make sense.

I don't want to overstate the appeal of freegan.info's events. Despite the hundreds of media stories that have focused on freegan.info, the group has never had more than fifteen active members at a time and only a tiny fraction of New Yorkers have ever attended a tour. Some freegans were remarkably cynical about the group's allure: as Wendy told me, "Well, the fact that there are things that you need, and there are things that people are throwing away is alluring. Then there's the taboo, breaking the taboo, people are allured by that kind of thing." Another was even more nonplussed: "I think half of them come because they like to get high and watch people pick stuff out of trash."

Nonetheless, freegan.info's capacity to bring an anti-capitalist message to an audience that might not otherwise be exposed to such ideas is notable. Some longtime participants, like Cindy, stayed involved because they were convinced that trash tours had an impact:

I think that in making changes, for individuals in their everyday lives, freegan.info has been very effective. I hear people talk about how coming to our events really did change how they viewed the world and how they lived their life in a very extreme way... I really haven't felt that in other types of activism, and I've been involved in a lot of anti-corporate campaigning and things like that.

When I asked group members *why* freegan trash tours seemed to grab attention and, occasionally, spark personal transformations, they almost always brought it back to waste. Cindy explained that, in her eyes, "Everyone has to acknowledge the problem of waste. Anyone who can make a rational decision is going to realize that this [waste] is a problem." Similarly, Janet told me that freeganism "makes sense...because waste is offensive to almost everyone."

Thrift, Profligacy, and the Spirit of Capitalism

What was it that made “waste” such a compelling topic? Adam begrudgingly postulated to me that freeganism was more appealing than the other causes he had been involved in because waste reduction was an opportunity to invoke “old people and traditional values.” One group member put it a bit more positively: “We’re promoting old-fashioned values of frugality, generosity, wise conservation of resources, community-centered life, and civic responsibility.” What both of them hinted at is that the *idea* of waste has been just as closely bound-up with the evolution of American capitalism as the *material* stuff we call waste. A glimpse into this history tells us a great deal about the origins of the fetish of waste and the reasons why exposing wasted ex-commodities can be surprisingly resonant.

To start with, it’s crucial to establish that whether or not we believe capitalism is “moral” in the normative sense of being right or wrong, it is undeniably a moral system that depends on ethical beliefs and values.³⁵ On its own, capitalism’s central imperative—“production for production’s sake, accumulation for accumulation’s sake”—is not intrinsically alluring to most people.³⁶ The vast majority of us are interested in far more than just making money and reinvesting it to make even more. We value things such as leisure, sociability, and community, none of which are well-served by capitalism’s unswerving emphasis on profit. Precisely because capitalism’s root goal is so unappealing, capitalism must provide *other* forms of moral justifications that convince people to contribute to a system that may not serve their best

³⁵ (see Fourcade and Healy 2007).

³⁶ Max Weber (2001:18) called the idea of making money only so that one can make even *more* money “absolutely irrational.”

interests. These moral motivations constitute what Max Weber famously christened the “spirit of capitalism.”³⁷

If the notion of a moral “spirit” seems to imply that capitalism is a quasi-religious system, that’s because it is. Anthropologists and sociologists have documented how neo-liberal policies are frequently presented as a “gospel of salvation,”³⁸ reflecting a “religious-like certitude...[of] the moral superiority of organizing all dimensions of social life according to market principles.”³⁹ For the Puritan sects of colonial America, thrift, judicious stewardship of resources, and diligent labor became ways of demonstrating that one was part of God’s elect and chosen to go to heaven. As such, “waste of time [was] the first and in principle the deadliest of sins.”⁴⁰ With luxury consumption also derided as a form of “waste,” the Puritans had no outlet for the fruits of their labors other than to reinvest them in further production.⁴¹ Ironically, the American capitalist juggernaut, which has wound up wantonly spitting out ex-commodities, started with people obsessed with avoiding waste.

Indeed, throughout most of our history, “waste” and related concepts of “efficiency” and “thrift” have been central to discussions about the ethics of economic life. Exhortations against “waste” provided moral guidance within the rapidly changing political and economic context of post-independence America.⁴² For centuries, “thrift” was a hallmark of middle-class respectability: it was taught in schools, extolled from pulpits, and popularized by public

³⁷ (2001:17). Other theorists have talked about how capitalism must be fused with “extra-economic meaning” (Tugal 2009: 248) or given a “transcendental ethic” (Bell 1996:21) that furnishes people with “powerful moral reasons for rallying to capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005:9).

³⁸ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:292).

³⁹ (Somers and Block 2005:260–261).

⁴⁰ (2001:104).

⁴¹ (Falasca-Zamponi 2011:35).

⁴² (Weber 2009:12; Yates and Hunter 2011:10).

intellectuals like Benjamin Franklin. Middle class reformers often suggested that the key to economic advancement for the poor and working classes was to eliminate “wasteful” habits, like gambling or drinking, and adopt “thrifty” ones, like saving and re-use.⁴³ The earliest consumer and environmental movements, too, claimed that their goals were to reduce “waste” and ensure the efficient, wise, and prudent use of resources.⁴⁴

We don’t have to reach back centuries to find examples of those in power calling for thrift and everyday citizens responding in kind. In World War I, government agencies admonished people to “use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without”⁴⁵ and housewives were told to save fatty acids for soap, fruit pits and nut shells for gas masks, and other organic waste for pig feed and fertilizer. On the home front during the next World War, citizens who had just lived through the deprivations of the Great Depression eagerly participated in collections of scrap metal to make munitions.⁴⁶ A “Consumer’s Pledge Song” harkened back to the Protestant Ethic, admonishing, “Do not be extravagant and waste / For wasting is a sin.”⁴⁷

Evidently, though, the songs’ lyrics did not echo for long. Over time, moral injunctions to thrift and non-wasting have served any number of ends—such as achieving spiritual salvation or victory over Germany or Japan—but one of them was to further economic growth. In an era of genuine shortages, eliminating wasted material and re-using scraps in production was crucial for driving the capitalist machine forward. As I noted before, though, over time the key challenge of continued growth has shifted from managing scarcity to disposing of an abundant surplus. And just as a non-wasting “spirit of capitalism” was drilled into us in one period, it was drilled out of

⁴³ (Haveman, Rao, and Paruchuri 2007).

⁴⁴ (Cohen 2003; McNeill and Vrtis 2011).

⁴⁵ (qtd. in Rogers 2005:109).

⁴⁶ (Zimring 2005:94)

⁴⁷ (qtd. Cohen 2003:68).

us when it had outlived its purpose. Keynesian economics, which dominated American economic policy and public discourse after the War, suggested that by spending—not saving—individuals could contribute to the health of the economy. Profligacy was patriotic, while, according to the editor of *Fortune* magazine, “thrift is now un-American.”⁴⁸ The notion that consumption and the disposal that both resulted from and facilitated it was a “patriotic act with national consequences”⁴⁹ marked a complete reframing of the moral basis of capitalism.⁵⁰

I don’t want to suggest that consumers were hapless dupes of manipulative executives. Instead, consumer’s responded to the changing ethics of waste with a mixture of gusto and wariness. As historian Susan Strasser recounts:

Throughout most of our history, people of all classes and in all places have practiced an everyday regard for objects, the labor involved in creating them, and the materials from which they were made. Even as...Americans eagerly adapted to a consumer culture, they mended, reused, saved, and made do.⁵¹

I do want to insist, though, that getting people to (literally and figuratively) “discard” their old non-wasting ways took some real work and time. There was an invariable lag between the introduction of products that made people’s lives cleaner and more convenient and people’s willingness to adopt them.⁵²

⁴⁸ (qtd. in Cohen 2003:121).

⁴⁹ (Weber 2009:157).

⁵⁰ See Bell (1996).

⁵¹ (1999:46). In fact, as Strasser shows, selling leftover scraps to peddlers to be used in industrial processes actually furnished much of the disposable income that people then used to buy manufactured products. Paradoxically, the adoption of mass consumption was partly facilitated by household recycling.

⁵² Sanitary napkins and paper cups are two examples developed by Strasser (1999:Ch.4).

Getting people to consume more food is an almost paradigmatic example. Guthman and DePuis chart the slow development of our “culture of bulimia,” in which advertisements, public health discourses about the value of thinness and an obesity epidemic, and the infrastructure of food availability (think, Coca-Cola contracts to provide beverages for elementary schools) encourage us to oscillate between binging on and purging ourselves of excess food.⁵³ In effect, “by accommodating a faster turnover of commodities, either by obesity or disgorgement, the body becomes a place where capitalism’s contradictions”—that is to say, the inelasticity of food demand—“are temporarily resolved” through expanding our waistlines.⁵⁴ In this, the government has been profoundly complicit. The government’s dietary advice, heavily manipulated by the agricultural lobby, has almost invariably centered on telling people to eat *more*.⁵⁵ The underlying effect, of course, was to get people to *buy more*: 500 more calories a day, in fact, between 1970 and 2011.⁵⁶ This is itself a form of waste, since the extra food does little to nourish or sustain us.⁵⁷

Does this mean that the everyday consumer in Western societies has abandoned the idea that waste is sinful? Even if at an aggregate level modern capitalism requires that we be magnificently wasteful, as individuals, we’ve never entirely relinquished practices of thrift. Studies of household economies consistently find that people will go to great lengths to pass on,

⁵³ (2008:442)

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ (Nestle 2002:54). When the USDA released a pamphlet that encouraged people to “cut down on fatty meats,” it was the agency’s most-requested publication, but was withdrawn under pressure from the cattle industry (Nestle 2002:46).

⁵⁶ (Economic Research Service 2013).

⁵⁷ See Blair and Sobal (2006) for a discussion of food waste through excess consumption.

donate, and re-use even monetarily worthless objects.⁵⁸ Anyone who leaves a chair or box of clothes on the sidewalk for collection is likely to discover that a modern form of waste reclamation—curb-side scavenging—is still irresistible for many urban treasure hunters and furniture foragers.⁵⁹ There’s a bit of truth to freegans’ claim that, as humans, “We’re all scavengers deep down.” No surprise that “recycling” is eagerly practiced by an enormous number of people with a range of demographic characteristics and political ideologies.⁶⁰ The persistence of a concern for waste is perhaps most evident with respect to food⁶¹: one survey found that wasting food provoked more “green guilt” than any other behavior associated with damaging the environment.⁶²

The fact that “waste” is still perceived as a moral wrong by large numbers of people is evident on freegan.info trash tours. Even in a city not known for its politeness, virtually everyone will wish the freegans “good luck” when told that the event is an attempt to reduce waste. Or, as two elderly women told Janet one night, they’ll condemn food waste as a “sin against God.” During tours, “waste” served as a flexible metaphor for a range of issues that people could apply to things they perceived as unfair or inefficient. One night, a cab driver stopped his car in order to watch us root through the trash outside a supermarket. I was assigned to hand out fliers, so I

⁵⁸ (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Gregson, Metcalfe, and Crewe 2007; Harrell and McConocha 1992; Jacoby, Berning, and Dietvorst 1977). Note that much of this research is from Great Britain, not the U.S., although there is little reason to believe that everyday practices regarding waste differ significantly between the two countries.

⁵⁹ (Brosius, Fernandez, and Cherrier 2013; Guillard and Roux 2014). Rathje and Murphy (1992:189) calculated that, based on the city of Tucson’s population size, around 65 appliances should have been discarded a day. But when they checked the municipal dump, the appliances never appeared. They concluded that almost all surplus appliances were circulated among personal networks, re-sold to scrap dealers, or harvested from the curb by scavengers.

⁶⁰ (Derksen and Gartrell 1993; Lybecker, McBeth, and Kusko 2013; Pichardo Almanzar et al. 1998; Zimmer, Stafford, and Stafford 1994).

⁶¹ (Cappellini and Parsons 2012; Evans 2011; Watson and Meah 2012).

⁶² (Carpenter 2012).

walked over to his car, gave him a calendar of freegan events, and explained to him why we were dumpster diving. When I started talking about “waste” and how stores throw out still-edible food, he cut me off and launched into a tirade about the way oil companies were harming cab drivers in the pursuit of “wasteful” profits. Another observer, upon hearing the freegans’ justification for dumpster diving, adopted the same terminology to assail the “wasteful” wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Jason, perhaps exaggerating slightly, once remarked that, “I’ve never met anyone who disagrees with the basic idea of freeganism”: that “waste” is a bad thing. Clearly, for most people, opposing “waste” is not a complex political or ideological principle, but a basic moral value mixed with practical common sense.⁶³

Fetishism and the Strange Appeal of Eating Trash

Of course, people—not just “capitalists,” but *people*—likely including many people who encounter or even participate in a trash tour, are incredibly wasteful. The average American produces 4.4 pounds of garbage a day⁶⁴ and chucks 25% of the food he or she purchases.⁶⁵ So is our professed concern with waste a sham? Not entirely. First, it’s worth noting that beliefs and practices can pull people in different directions: we can value thrift and non-wasting and convenience and disposability all at once, even though they are contradictory.⁶⁶ Our lives can be structured such that we loathe waste but, in the hustle-and-bustle of making do and getting by, we produce it anyway.⁶⁷ Second, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, justifications for neo-

⁶³ As Watson and Meah (2012:113) find, “rather than expression[s] of global citizenship, resistance to wasting food is primarily rooted in thrift.”

⁶⁴ (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2013).

⁶⁵ (Bloom 2010:187).

⁶⁶ As McNeil and Vrtis (2011:508) observe, “In the hearts and minds of most Americans, there is, and has long been, a struggle between the rival impulses of restraint and indulgence, of thrift and consumption.”

⁶⁷ This is the main insight of “practice” theory (Warde 2005)

liberalism have frequently invoked the menace of “waste” to agitate for expanding markets and cutting social services. These arguments would be fruitless if people weren’t predisposed to think waste was a bad thing.

Then again, I’ve *also* suggested that neo-liberalism virtually necessitates the creation of waste through ex-commodification. There are subtle mechanisms that cover up the contradiction between the pervasive discourse of non-wasting and the wasteful reality of our economy and our daily lives, mechanisms that are integral to the fetish of waste. While people may acknowledge, as one researcher found, that “if they were confronted with the amount of waste they had individually produced, they would inevitably be shocked”⁶⁸, the reality is that they largely *aren’t* confronted by it. Although for much of human history, people lived in close proximity with their wastes,⁶⁹ technical innovations like garbage disposals and sealed waste bins have made waste a steadily less perceptible part of social life, even as producing it has become steadily more integral to the economy.⁷⁰

Throughout the 20th century, municipal governments have gone from treating waste as a valuable resource to be recovered for production to a “technical problem” which simply “needed to be put in its proper place.”⁷¹ At the pinnacle of our waste disposal assemblage is the sanitary landfill, a technical apparatus designed to “render waste invisible as rapidly as possible.”⁷² My favorite anecdote of the ethereal nature of modern waste comes from anthropologist Robin Nagle, who found that New York City sanitation workers could stare blatantly at women without

⁶⁸ (de Coverly et al. 2008:297; see, also, Evans 2011; Gregson et al. 2007; Harrell and McConocha 1992; Scanlan 2005).

⁶⁹ (O’Brien 2008).

⁷⁰ (Chappells and Shove 1999; de Coverly et al. 2008; Rathje and Murphy 1992).

⁷¹ (Rogers 2005:61).

⁷² (Reno 2009:37).

fear of reproach, because, to the inhabitants of the city, they were simply *not there*.⁷³ To put it more poetically, “Every day, silent rubbish collectors converse with silent rubbish.”⁷⁴

The other aspect of the fetish that I mentioned in my introduction is that even if we *did* see our waste, we might not see it for what some of it really is: useful ex-commodities. The way waste is represented in political discourse and popular culture has changed significantly since the early days of the republic, when “waste” meant something that was “underused” or “inefficient.” In those days, waste *had* value, but its full value wasn’t being realized. At the turn of the century, though, a new discourse emerged, one that suggested that waste was not only valueless but a *negative* value that had the potential to harm us. In the eyes of progressive era reformers:

Waste, by polluting the physical surroundings, threatened health and promoted squalor. Primitive collection and disposal practices were signs of backwardness and barbarity; civilized societies were well-kept and sanitary. One could hardly expect citizens to seek moral and material progress in a despoiled habitat polluted by litter and disease-breeding refuse. In the broadest sense filth bred chaos, while cleanliness produced order.⁷⁵

This notion of waste-as-pollution turned waste from physical stuff that should be reused into a powerful symbolic metaphor for danger, disease, and disorder. Today, this representation finds a material analog in fears of the toxic outputs—such as plastics, spent nuclear fuel, or electronics—of advanced capitalism.⁷⁶ Although only a small part of the waste stream, they

⁷³ (Nagle 2013:16). This notion of “not-there-ness” is also developed in Perry’s (1978) ethnography of sanitation workers.

⁷⁴ Min’an (2011:353).

⁷⁵ (Melosi 1981:110).

⁷⁶ For a discussion of the increasingly toxic outputs of advanced capitalism, see (Elliott and Frickel 2013; MacBride 2012; van Wyck 2005).

dominate public discussion: Gille cataloged references to industrial waste in five U.S. newspapers, and found that of forty-one articles, all but ten were about hazardous waste.⁷⁷ The implication is that waste holds “no positive meaning” but is “inherently useless and harmful.”⁷⁸ While certainly true for *some* waste, though, the conflation of “waste” and “pollution” is at least partly false and a key part of the fetishism that blinds us to the fact that much of what gets labeled waste *does* still have potential uses.

Given the symbolic importance of discourses around “waste” in discussions of morality and economic life, and the material reality of waste in capitalist production, it’s no surprise that ideas circling around “waste” have frequently provided the vocabulary for anti-capitalist critiques in the United States.⁷⁹ The earliest American labor movements lambasted their employers as “idle,” “parasites,” and “opulent,” people who did “little else than eat, drink, and sleep while we [workers] labor.”⁸⁰ Thorstein Veblen gained widespread notoriety in 1899 for his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, which playfully lampooned the “conspicuous waste” of the wealthy in Gilded-Age America.⁸¹ In the 1920s, American socialists skeptical of the more abstract dimensions of Marxism developed their own critique of capitalism that hinged on the “waste” of materials and manpower created by unbridled free-market competition.⁸² The concern that laissez-faire capitalism was “wasteful” was picked up by advocates for the New Deal. When

⁷⁷ (2008:6–7).

⁷⁸ (Gille 2008:146).

⁷⁹ As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) show, *critiques* of capitalism have always taken place on the moral playing field set by capitalism itself.

⁸⁰ Qtd. in Voss (1993:99).

⁸¹ (1994:68).

⁸² See Chase (1929).

President Roosevelt inaugurated the Tennessee Valley Authority, he announced, “Many hard lessons have taught us the human waste that results from lack of planning.”⁸³

Concerns about waste returned with new force in the 1960s, albeit in a form that reflected the changing material face of capitalism. Vance Packard’s *The Waste Makers*, which derided the planned obsolescence, packaging, and advertising that were becoming increasingly prominent, was a bestseller. Herbert Marcuse, considered one of the most prominent thinkers of the “New Left” of the latter half of the 1960s, similarly denounced the “socially necessary waste” of capitalism, consisting of “parasitical and alienated functions” that produced profit but no real human value.⁸⁴ Railed another critic around the same time, “What makes the spectacle of Western bourgeois society so repulsive is the waste and squander of resources on needless products of status and display (e.g., the large, heavy automobile; the extravagant packaging of consumer items) for the sake of consumption.”⁸⁵ Since then, “waste” has continued to be a catch-all label for just about anything someone doesn’t like: advertising, military spending, unemployment—take your pick.⁸⁶

In a sense, then, it might seem like freegans aren’t doing anything new. Their trash tours invoke old criticisms of capitalism—that, in various ways, it is “wasteful”—and harken back to age-old values of thrift. What freegans add to the debate about the morality of capitalism is not fresh rhetoric, then, but *evidence*. Freegans don’t just say that capitalism is wasteful: they have

⁸³ (Fraser 2011:443).

⁸⁴ (1964:49). Across the pond, Guy Debord’s (2000:24) widely-read *Society of the Spectacle* opined that there has been an ongoing “decline of use value” that meant that the average inhabitant of Western societies had become “a consumer of illusions” rather than of useful products.

⁸⁵ (Bell 1996:273–274).

⁸⁶ For two polemics deploying a particularly amorphous view of “waste,” see Dowd (1989) and Smith (1989).

the ex-commodities to prove it. When socialists at the start of the 20th century or New Left thinkers of the '60s talked about “waste,” they were speaking in the abstract, comparing the present productivity of capitalism to an imagined socialist future without the “waste” of unemployment, idle factories, or useless goods. But, as I have pointed out, the “waste” of neo-liberalism is not just an idea, but physical stuff: ex-commodities that freegans can wave in people’s faces.

Recent sociological work on “materiality” has demonstrated the fairly intuitive point that material objects can serve as potent carriers of symbolic meanings.⁸⁷ In the moral universe of capitalism, things showing signs of “waste, spoilage, rejects, pollution, [and] deterioration” often serve as “proofs” of the “poor functioning of a disturbed system.”⁸⁸ It’s for this reason that images of former Soviet countries so often show mounds of wasted goods and material: they “prove” that socialism was inefficient and, by extension, immoral.

What freegans do is flip the moral “spirit” of neo-liberal capitalism on its head. As Adam once stated in a “waving the banana” speech: “One of the buzzwords of capitalism is efficiency. We hear it all the time. But a really efficient economy would be a cooperative economy, a gift economy in which things are shared freely.” While few of us would agree with this argument if it were presented to us in a textbook or a classroom, from the sidewalk, his point is hard to deny: the capitalist system really *does* generate a lot of waste, and through non-capitalist means, freegans are able to turn that waste back into wealth. Freegans do not just answer the questions posed by newcomers in the “freeganism 101” sessions, but offer proofs for those answers: that grocery stores exist to make money, not feed people; that this explains why stores do not donate

⁸⁷ (McDonnell 2010; Molotch 2003; Schudson 1989).

⁸⁸ Boltanski and Thevenot (2006:204–205).

good food; and that, in a capitalist society, objects without sufficient exchange value are wasted even if they still have use value.

Trash tours thus expose a fundamental tension. Today, capitalist growth and accumulation requires that useful things go to waste on an unprecedented scale. Yet the “moral spirit” behind growth and accumulation continues to be buttressed by admonitions for thrift and non-wasting. This anti-waste discourse has returned with renewed vigor as a way to agitate for neo-liberal policies. Usually, this contradiction is covered up by the fetish of waste, which keeps waste hidden and tells us that whatever waste we do see is polluted and valueless. What freegans do is challenge this fetishism through ex-commodities, bringing waste into public view and demonstrating that at least some of it still has use value. In so doing, they expose a crushing contradiction at the heart of neo-liberal capitalism.

There’s an adage among demographers to explain trends in public opinion: “people don’t change their minds, they die.”⁸⁹ While norms and values can at times shift quite rapidly (as with gay marriage), there is some truth to the maxim. Certainly, arguments about the “exploitative” or “alienating” nature of capitalism are not likely to win huge numbers of converts any time soon. Beliefs around food are notoriously sticky.⁹⁰ But freegans aren’t really asking people to change their minds. They’re simply demonstrating an extant but hidden disconnect between how most of us think our system *should* work and how it actually *does*, and giving them a concrete practice to try to reconcile the two. As Madeline put it:

The chances that someone off the street will espouse human extinction, primitivism, and extreme animal rights are nil. Real anarchism is when you appeal to what people already

⁸⁹ This statement was made by Professor Michael Hout in his introductory statistics class in Berkeley, spring of 2012.

⁹⁰ (Counihan 2002; DeSoucey 2010; Mennell, Murcott, and Otterloo 1992).

know. People know these things already. They know the stuff they're buying isn't making them happy; they know that we're hurting the earth. But you have to give them something to practice. Get their hands dirty.

Of course, few people confronted with ex-commodities for the first time respond by quitting their jobs and renouncing capitalism. A sizeable proportion of people stumbling on a trash tour will spend a few minutes looking over the scavenged food items offered to them. A smaller number will leave their e-mail address with a group organizer; a few of this latter group might even come to a later freegan.info event. Even those unwilling to "get their hands dirty" in a trash tour can tell an apartment-mate about the good food they found or directly (if infinitesimally) take a bite out of capitalist accumulation by taking free food rather than buying it. As such, because the trash tour is a *collective* performance, the range of ways people can contribute to freegan.info's anti-capitalist politics is a surprisingly wide and flexible one.

5. Back to Nature in NYC? Prefiguring with Waste

On first blush, Zaac seems like an unlikely candidate to be a “primitivist”—that is, someone who believes that human beings should return to a pre-industrial, pre-agricultural lifestyle. Born in Greenwich, Connecticut—one of the richest areas in the United States—to a father who runs a corporate headhunting firm, he attended the University of Connecticut to study computer science. At the time of our interview in 2009, he was still a Greenwich resident, and described his current job as “40 hours a week doing stuff that I don’t find important.” More specifically, Zaac programmed touch screen computers in rich people’s houses, a job whose social function was, by his admission, “making it easier for them to watch T.V.” Zaac didn’t deny the incongruity between his job and his freegan ideology of minimizing participation in capitalism, but explained the trade-off in terms of his usefulness as an activist: “How effective would I be if I’m worried about a place to sleep? My job allows me to be the change I wish to see.”

The first few times I met Zaac, he was wearing the same t-shirt from Farm Sanctuary, an animal liberation organization, that read “Peace Begins on Your Plate.” Like many freegans, Zaac’s passion for animal rights led him to become a vegan and, when he realized its limitations, a freegan as well. One look at Zaac, though, makes it clear that his interests go far beyond just recovering waste or helping animals. When Zaac showed up at one freegan.info reading group meeting, he was wearing a backpack that he had built out of bike tubes and was clad in sandals he put together from discarded fire hose. Attached to his backpack was a trowel he used to dig up edible plants he found in his travels, as well as a milk jug containing wild greens he had encountered while foraging in the suburbs. Without a job, he’d have to spend all of his time dumpstering, finding shelter, and scavenging other things he needs for survival. Thanks to his

regular income and the stability it buys him, Zaac sees himself as carving out time for what really matters: studying to learn new skills and building things.

I asked Zaac where his interest in making his own clothes and bags came from, and he told me that he started in high school when he built a tree house out of dumpstered materials. “I’ve always been a little crafty,” he explained, evoking the same intrinsic drive to deviate as other freegans. When I queried him about what he saw as the purpose of these skills, he seemed a little unsure, admitting that he could probably dumpster dive a backpack or shoes in much less time than it took to create them himself. He explained to me, though, that:

When I buy something I really need, I don’t feel like I own it. I’m afraid to sew it, patch it up. This backpack [that I built myself], I can feel it. I know what’s wrong with it; I know what’s right with it. If something’s not working, I can cut it up and make it work for me in a new way...Once you make something, you can control exactly what it’s going to do.

I pressed further, asking him if he envisioned *needing* these skills anytime soon. He responded, “I don’t know where exactly my learning is going towards, so I don’t know what I’m aiming for.”

He did cite the devastating hurricane in New Orleans—and the failures of traditional social institutions to provide for people in the aftermath—as one example of when survival skills might become valuable. Ultimately, he said, now is the time to gain such knowledge, since to him the environment is nearing collapse and “you don’t wait to learn to sail until you’re on the sailboat.” But, during one reading group where one attendee suggested that “re-skilling” was a good way to “prepare for the apocalypse,” he interjected: “People always talk about ‘preparing for the apocalypse’. But if you’re a passenger pigeon, or an indigenous hunter-gatherer, you’re

not preparing for the apocalypse. The apocalypse is already here.” When someone added that “peak oil” was likely to be the harbinger of the end-of-times for humans, he replied, “I really don’t worry about peak oil much. We’re going to run out of oxygen first.”

Learning how to create physical objects isn’t the only skill Zaac was developing in preparation for the globe’s bleak future. Zaac told me that, on weekends, he often looks for wild herbs in the forest or goes “mushrooming” with a group in Greenwich. Wild food foraging is, for him, part of adopting a completely different outlook towards the world around him: “When you’re my age and you go through the woods, you’re supposed to learn how to hike faster. But I’m all about slowing down and becoming more engaged.” He also valued his time spent foraging because it reoriented him towards making do with what was at hand, developing skills to cope with the unreliable resources provided to him by the physical environment. The contrast between foraging as a freegan and farming as a vegan, to him, was stark: “You could cut it [the forest] down and make a deep ecology farm, or you could just see what’s already being offered.” Zaac put these skills into practice in 2009, during a months-long bike trip into the remote reaches of Canada, turning back only when he made it so far north he could no longer survive on the plants he foraged.

Despite his dire predictions about the future of the biosphere, Zaac does not share the hermit-like, isolationist tendencies of many “survivalists.” When Sowmya arrived at one reading group and reported that Adam couldn’t attend, owing to untreated back pain, Zaac rifled through one of his notebooks until he found a medieval herbal pain remedy. Zaac frequently taught “skill-shares” for the freegan group, taking particular pleasure in taking cast-off, wasted items and empowering others how to make them into something useful. Zaac’s commitment to making

new things out of waste, then, was much more than a strategy for minimizing his carbon footprint: it was a way of embodying and enacting his vision for the future on a quotidian basis.

As Zaac explained it, “There’s just something about this whole withdrawal practice—being a vegan, riding a bicycle instead of a car, foraging instead of buying—that one starts to embody what they’re actually talking about. They seem to kind of go with each other internally.” Yet clearly not all aspects of Zaac’s life “go with each other internally.” There is a particularly glaring disjuncture between Zaac’s back-to-nature ethos and life in a Connecticut suburb of New York City. Like other freegans, then, Zaac simultaneously celebrated living more “naturally” even as he consciously continued to spend much of his time in what would seem to be the most unnatural of places—a city.

Although thus far I’ve looked primarily at how freegans used wasted ex-commodities to *criticize* capitalism, this was only ever one-half of the group’s political equation. Freegans also engaged in myriad direct actions, from wild food foraging to community bike workshops and sewing skill-shares, outside of their trash tours. As with freegans’ individual lives, these projects were riven with contradictions. Nonetheless, through using waste in creative ways, freegans worked to create new modes of valuation, daily rhythms, and ways of sensing the environment that—although far from overthrowing capitalism—were at odds with normative modes of thinking and acting in capitalist society. They prefigured elements of a more natural and environmentally harmonious world in the heart of New York City.

The Freegan Community and the Natural Ethos

Many freegans cited building “community” as a core freegan practice. In this, freegans were not alone: an attempt to re-build “community” in the face of perceived cultural atomization

and fragmentation has become a core part of radical politics in the United States.¹ Freegans explained that “community”—that is, routine interactions with other freegans—was necessary for keeping to the strictures of their lifestyles: “If you’re not part of a community, you might use mass transit or grow your own food, but it’s so ingrained in our society to buy things that it takes a lot of retraining of your brain to actually consider whether or not you need to buy things,” explained Cindy. In the medium-term, building a small-scale, self-sufficient community that could meet the full range of activists’ needs outside of capitalism was frequently articulated as a central goal of freegans’ prefigurative politics. As Sasha elaborated, “You have to have a community if you’re going to make squatting or dumpster-diving work. They’re necessary, if you want the capacity to stay out of the capitalist feeding frenzy.”

To some extent, the conviviality of community could be seen on the trash tours themselves. In my time with the group, I noted that many people would come to trash tours without collecting any food. As one middle-aged man in a sports coat explained to me, “This is a great way to meet radical people without going to bars.” One dumpster-diver I met in Europe described how, in the Netherlands, diving too had become a social activity:

It has become a trend, dumpster diving. We go and find people already there, putting their foodstuff out and trying different things, laughing and having a beer. More people are joining, and we’ll discuss, ‘Try this, try that.’ Half the time I’ll find some friends at my favorite dumpster when I go there.

For many freegans, dumpster-diving thus re-socialized processes of acquiring, preparing, and consuming food—a stark contrast to the highly individualized actions usually taken under the

¹ (Epstein 1991; Grigsby 2004; Lichterman 1996).

banner of “ethical consumerism.”² And while freegans first reached for political justifications for dumpster diving, most eventually added that dumpstering—particularly with a group—was “fun.”³

Monthly freegan “feasts” held in the apartments of group participants represented more deliberate attempts to create a sense of community within freegan.info. Cindy explained the value of building community through food by critiquing the way that, in cities, “people aren’t treating food as social glue which sticks community together. People lack that. People see that [sociability centered on food] is very valuable.” As Adam put it in one “waving the banana” speech, “Capitalism tries to convince us that we’re all in this alone, so building a sense of community in people is a huge threat.” He followed his comment by inviting those listening to the speech to an upcoming feast, suggesting that the event had a profoundly political purpose.

In December 2011, I attended a feast at Madeline’s modest but well-decorated flat in Brooklyn. When I arrived, she and her partner were brainstorming a menu for the evening based on the haphazard collection of vegetables and packaged beans and pasta they had found on the trash tour two days prior. Slowly, other members of the group trickled in, each bringing their own eclectic ingredients. As new contributions piled up, the menu changed: an Italian dish turned into curry when no one brought eggplant as expected; avocados meant for a salad were instead turned into guacamole when someone announced they had found tortilla chips. In a sense, the freegan feast was similar to the traditional American idea of the potluck, in which each person contributes a dish to a communal meal, yet radically democratized. Freegans’ individual

² As Weber (2009:224) observes, most ethical consumers “operate in their own atomized spheres.”

³ Numerous other studies have noted the role of “fun” as a motivation for dumpster diving (Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013; Edwards and Mercer 2007; Fernandez et al. 2011; Rush 2006).

offerings mixed together organically throughout the planning, preparation, and cooking. If many freegans came to the group after feeling alienated from their previous activism, freegan feasts offered an opportunity for them to construct the principled, non-oppressive community that they felt those other movements lacked. In August 2008, the menu at one feast in Leia's Brooklyn apartment included broccoli rabe, vegetable stew, bread with hummus, stir fry, and, for dessert, a fruit smoothie. Someone commented how rare it was to be at an event where, as a vegan, she could eat every single dish served.

More than that, the feast created a space where freegans could openly and shamelessly share beliefs that would put them on the fringes of the mainstream animal rights or environmental movements.⁴ At Leia's feast, for example, the conversation eventually turned into a strident debate over the efficacy of animal welfare legislation and the recent decision in Spain to grant some human rights to Great Apes. When I mentioned that I had taken a class with Peter Singer, an animal rights philosopher, Cindy called out from the kitchen, with a tone of outrage, "Wait, isn't he the guy who says it's okay to eat mollusks?" Later, Jason brought up that he thought the example of early hunter-gatherers indicated the possibility that some forms of meat eating could be ethical, a proposition that proved quite contentious. Sasha countered:

I feel one-hundred times happier when I'm not eating animals because I know my biology is not set up for being an animal eater...I don't want to kill any animals, and I don't really want to eat them. That's just how I am. I feel like it's a better life to be more at peace with nature.

⁴ When I asked Zaac why attending feasts was worth the long train-ride in from Connecticut, he explained, "I like the feasts and the sense of the community they generate...you can talk about things that you won't talk about with other people. It's a way of reminding myself not to get sucked into the mainstream."

When the argument became heated, Jason backpedaled, stating that, “To a large degree, my belief is that what we did before civilization was pretty much the right thing. But in the case of hunting, perhaps we don’t just have to revert to a pre-civilized way of life.” He then sat back and laughed and said it was nice to be able to debate this sort of “minutiae.”

These feasts, filled with an almost tangible feeling of solidarity, allowed freegans to articulate their visions for the future and develop a conception of human nature on which that vision could be based. Feasts were, in effect, what social movement scholars call “free spaces”⁵ in which activists can form collective identities, openly discuss movement strategy, and float radical ideas without fear of how they will be interpreted by a wider audience. At least for one night a month, freegans’ apartments become the site of just the kind of community they struggled to find elsewhere, a space in which their ethical concerns were respected, their dietary choices accepted, and where conversations about animals, capitalism, or the environment could take place with willing listeners.

Freegan.info also attempted to constitute itself as a free space where radical prognostications could flow freely during its monthly reading group. For most of 2008, we met in the food court of Grand Central Station, feasting on leftovers from harried captains of finance commuting between the suburbs and Manhattan. More than just a glorified book club, the reading group claimed to be the “research wing” of freegan.info, developing both critical analyses of the past and blueprints for the future. One month, our reading came from Jim Mason’s *An Unnatural Order*, which argues—in brief—that “our current social and

⁵ (see Polletta 1999).

environmental problems...began several millennia ago when our ancestors took up farming and broke the primal bonds with the living world and put human beings above all other life.”⁶

Adam seized on the book’s “anti-civilization” message to argue that “the foragers were the ones who got it right, everything else is basically fucked up.” Despite his indefatigable work to save humanity from what he perceived as impending environmental doom, there was an air of misanthropy in his views: “Humans should stop living anywhere but the ecosystems we’re evolved for... We need to stop adapting every ecosystem for us, rather than staying where we’re adapted to. We’re basically an invasive species on the vast majority of the planet. It’s time to wipe the slate clean.”⁷ Evie challenged him, noting “There’s six billion of us—we have to figure out a way to get from A to B that isn’t cruel.” She ultimately agreed, however, that, “There was a point where human beings stepped out of nature and decided to control nature, and that’s where we went wrong.”⁸

Discussions like these gave voice to a “primitivist” current in *freegan.info*, espoused by the likes of Cindy, Adam, Jason, and Zaac, which questioned not just “capitalism” but industrialism, agriculture, and civilization itself. At the root of this belief system was the idea that all these forms of social organization deviated from the “natural” way for humans to live. Jason attempted to reframe the primitivist imaginary in more positive terms:

My vision is that eventually we live in a world where we don’t have any of this modern technology. Live with the land, on the land, and everything we get comes from nature.

⁶ (2005:11).

⁷ I don’t want to overstate freegans’ tolerance for these kinds of views. During Adam’s diatribe, Quinn wandered off, returning only when—in his words—“the usual human extinction rant was over.”

⁸ For a critique of essentialist environmental discourses like this which search for a “root cause” of where humanity went wrong, see Ellis (1996).

We can have communities, art, philosophy, language, all these types of things. I don't like talking about going back to pre-civilization, but going forward to post-civilization. Civilization is fundamentally, inherently crazy and unsustainable. And eventually it exhausts itself. I think we can be mature, responsible beings, but still be wild animals.

That's what other animals on the planet do, why should we be any different?

In such a future, humanity would recover the natural community it lost through dominating nature. Explained Adam during one reading group, "Our lives seem meaningless, because we're so disconnected. Unlike every species on the planet, we're not living as part of a sustained community of beings interacting with each other, facilitating each others' societies. We've set ourselves up as masters of the world, and it's lonely at the top." While some in the group were profoundly skeptical of these sorts of discussions—"You can't just turn back to the clock to a million B.C.," Madeline was fond of pointing out—the group nonetheless created a supportive community environment for espousing and developing these views.

For many freegans, then, getting "back to nature" was a core objective of prefigurative politics. As Jonathan articulated it, "We're just so disconnected from it [nature]. One of the goals [of freeganism] is just connecting with each other and connecting with the rest of life on earth, connecting with the earth itself." On first glance, there would seem to be a host of contradictions between these visions of nature and freegans' urban lives. While these incongruities are real—I discuss them in the next chapter—freegans nonetheless *did* find ways to put some of the values articulated within their community into practice in the cracks and crevices of the city environment. They did so by engaging with the physical world around them; above all, through their interaction with urban waste.

Foraging, Wild and Otherwise

Freegan.info occasionally organizes wild food foraging tours during temperate months, and it was during one such tour—led by Zaac through Inwood Hill Park on the northern edge of Manhattan—that the idea that freegans were getting “back to nature,” even in the city, occurred to me. One of the attendees, a traveling anarchist =who made ends meet through dumpster diving and occasional gigs as a web designer, told me that he often foraged for wild food in city parks in California but wanted to try it in New York. He was surprised to discover that many of the plants in this park were similar to what he would find at home, despite the vastly different climates of the two areas and the disparate environmental bioregions in which the cities were situated. When he pointed this out, Zaac responded that, “There’s lots of biodiversity in the rainforest, but there’s unique species here [in the city] too.” Each of them noted that the city was, in a sense, an ecosystem in its own right.⁹

As a way of providing for freegans’ material needs, wild food foraging is wildly ineffective and time-consuming. Wild mushrooms, the chief object of our search that day in the park, are difficult to find, and when encountered, can only be safely identified by an experienced mushroomer.¹⁰ Even Zaac, who has spent hundreds of hours learning scientific names of mushrooms, techniques for finding them, and tests for determining which are poisonous, readily admitted that he gets only a minimal amount of his food from foraging. For all of his experience, the most practical advice Zaac could offer a novice like me was that it was possible to eat the dandelions growing in Prospect Park—but only if I cooked them properly, and, he added, they would still be wrenchingly bitter. Foraging is not just impractical from the standpoint of survival;

⁹ For a discussion of cities as ecosystems, see Botkin and Beveridge (1997).

¹⁰ (Fine 1998).

it is also an odd choice for a group seeking to make a political point. While trash tours constituted a symbolic protest against waste and overconsumption, wild food foraging is non-confrontational and rarely receives any media attention.

And yet, despite all of these “problems” with wild food foraging as a form of collective action, the freegan group was invariably thrilled whenever Zaac agreed to lead a wild food tour. As I discovered, wild food foraging had significance to the group that transcended its seeming impracticality. Hunting wild burdock root and edible flowers may not provide much in the way of sustenance, but it did offer a tangible means through which freegans reconstructed man-made urban parks as “natural” and “wild” spaces. Within the context of a wild food foraging tour, mundane objects like mushrooms became “patches of anarchy...[revealing] nature at work.”¹¹ Simple acts of respect for plants during such a tour, too, were emblematic of a reconfigured mindset towards nature as a whole. As Zaac admonished us before our tour, “You see a bunch of ostrich ferns growing in a clump together. If you know to only pick half of them, they’ll grow back. But pick all of them, and it dies.”

As Zaac’s caution to his wild food foraging tour attendees reminded us, our relationships to the plants we collected on the tour were a form of prefigurative politics, in which we were enacting new ways of thinking about and acting with respect to “nature.” As with trash tours, wild food foraging expeditions entailed finding value in unlikely places. During our interview, Zaac explained that:

Things that seem to be waste aren’t waste when you look a little closer. Mushrooms, for example, are crucial for a lot of invertebrates, even if we haven’t done the science yet to figure out what those species are... This practice of rethinking what is ‘waste’ has a lot of

¹¹ (Fine 1998:34).

value. In Hurricane Sandy, a huge number of oak trees fell down, but I helped to organize mushroom cultivation workshops on those trees that had fallen, so they didn't have to go to waste.

Although freegan literature often describes the group as supportive of urban farming, and some like Madeline or Jonathan were actively involved in community garden projects, others saw wild foraging as better reflecting their environmental ideals.¹² Foraging practices suggested that much “production” of food—even sustainable production in an urban garden—was unnecessary, if only we saw the use value of often-overlooked plants growing around us. It also prefigured a broader ethic towards natural resources through measured harvesting of wild plants.

Freegans envisioned themselves as a band of foragers living off the resources of the urban environment in another way: through dumpster diving. Some scholars have described the huge quantities of waste flowing through cities as a kind of “urban metabolism”¹³, a “system of flows so fundamental to the city's well-being that its work is a form of breathing, albeit with an exchange of objects instead of air molecules.”¹⁴ Rhetoric aside, there is nothing obviously “natural” about New York’s vast waste-disposal apparatus. Indeed, part of the message of public trash tours is that ex-commodity waste is *unnatural*: not an inherent and inevitable part of human society but a historically-specific product of capitalism.

¹² Even when freegans did talk about urban farming, they often did so in a way that reflected an ethic of respecting, rather than manipulating, nature. As Leia said in an e-mail to the group about a garden she was planning, “My ideal is a little different than just having a mini-farm. I’m very interested in letting the plants that just naturally grow in the area do their thing. This includes ‘weeds’. I don’t really believe in the concept of an undesirable plant. I believe in biodiversity.”

¹³ (Keil and Boudreau 2006).

¹⁴ (Nagle 2013:4).

At other times, though, freegans talked about ex-commodities as if they were “natural” resources.¹⁵ As Zaac explained it, “The difference between foraging and agriculture is trying to control nature, versus preparing yourself to respond to whatever nature throws at you.” Even though freegans knew that waste did not come from “nature,” they occasionally spoke and acted as if waste were a fixed part of their physical environment. One weekend, I went to Governor’s Island with Jonathan and Marie for a free art festival. We had been discussing the recent closure of the Occupy Wall Street encampment, and I commented that the island had large tracts of open space that could be appropriated. Jonathan replied, pensively, “Yeah, but what would you eat? You’d have to go into the city to dumpster [dive], and there are only ferries on the weekend.”

Marie laughed, “You remember that food comes from places other than dumpsters, right? You *could* farm it.”

“Oh right,” Jonathan replied, “I forgot.”

Taking advantage of the city’s “natural” resources required freegans to develop specialized knowledge of where and when garbage became available. David expressed his pride in this highly localized form of expertise, telling me, “It’s gotten to the point where if somebody calls me and says ‘It’s Thursday at 7:00 p.m. and I want vegan ice cream’ I could say, ‘Oh, go to the such and such store on this street and there will be frozen vanilla and chocolate.’” Freegans claimed that, without this practical knowledge, they were faced with scarcity. Leia told me that when she moved to New York, she was “starving” because she couldn’t find food. Even though she had lived off of waste in Minnesota, she was accustomed to looking in back alleys and dumpsters: she only learned how to effectively forage in New York when she attended a

¹⁵ In this respect, waste objects are “polyvocal,” carrying multiple cultural meaning at once (McDonnell 2010).

freegan.info event and was taught how. Of course, her base of “natural” resources was “socially, culturally, and economically defined”¹⁶, but, because of the strength of her commitment to living off of dumpstered food, the hunger she faced was real.

Gaining skills in dumpster diving provided another way for freegans to see themselves as living “naturally,” even in a city. Marie described what she saw as the parallels between being an “urban forager” and a hunter-gatherer:

When you go dumpster diving...you do things in the natural way. It's like going harvesting or gathering...[or] going in the forest to find food... You need to explore, first, to find good spots. Then you need to really work for your food: it's harder, you need to open bags, to search, to climb into a dumpster...It's always surprising. You don't know what you're going to find. It makes it more natural. It's like going back to the time when people would go into natural spaces to get food...When you have crops, and you're a farmer, you know what you're going to get. The freegan way is more like hunting.

In contrast to a modern industrial food system built on standardization and predictability, freegan dumpster dives were full of unscripted moments. As one freegan exclaimed before a trash tour, “It's always unpredictable; that's part of the adventure of it!” I witnessed first-hand the excitement that bubbled up whenever there was a particularly rare find, like a box of tempeh or a pomegranate.

As I have repeatedly emphasized, freegans have sharply divergent visions about the kind of post-capitalist future they envision. Some self-described “primitivists”—like Adam, Cindy, Zaac, or Jason—often invoked pre-agricultural gatherers as a model. One of Adam's essays on the freegan.info website celebrates gatherers' harmonious relationship with nature:

¹⁶ (Castree 2005:115).

Before production, before industry, before agriculture, even before the advent of the ritual hunt, humans provided for themselves through direct communion with nature's bounty, foraging fruits, nuts, seeds, berries, and roots.¹⁷ The land was not owned and food was not a product. People consumed to meet their needs, with little opportunity for waste or overconsumption. The only 'producer' was the Earth itself. Human patterns of consumption were governed within the context of our native ecosystems. Humans existed as equals with other animals and the earth, not as owners, conquerors, 'stewards', or destroyers.¹⁸

For at least some group participants, this imaginary of a future in which humans would live "naturally" did not just exist in their heads. Instead, freegans' quotidian practices were, in small ways, bringing "nature" back into their city, repurposing the human-built parks and waste flows of the metropolis to new and unexpected ends.

Freegan Senses, Freegan Bodies

For freegans, living off of dumpster-dived food entailed not just new attitudes and practices towards physical things but also towards their own bodies. A long line of scholarly work has highlighted how city life directs our senses towards some aspects of the urban environment—like the wealth of commodities on sale—and away from others—like pollution or poverty.¹⁹ As he often did, Sasha had picked up on this element of academic critique and tied it to freeganism:

¹⁷ The question of whether freegans were "primordially" evolved to be vegetarian was an important and contentious one within freegan.info, reflecting the extent to which freegan conceptions of morality were based on what they saw as "natural."

¹⁸ <http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-philosophy/freeganism-liberating-our-consumption-liberating-our-lives-2/>

¹⁹ (Giradet 1992; Simmel 1957).

Repression has a lot to do with the senses. I feel like pollution has a lot to do with the senses. And I feel like, at the same time, as our sensitivity is oppressed by society, our senses are polluted through industrialism. I feel like a lot of industrialism and a lot of pollution is just caused by that kind of insensitivity to the climate, to the environment. While Sasha's commentary might seem abstract, the way we use our senses is undeniably implicated in the production of ex-commodities, albeit in largely hidden ways.

Western cultures privilege the use of sight over other senses.²⁰ This is acutely true with respect to food. In the Western world, 30% of fruits and vegetables that are harvested are “rejected” and diverted as animal food or waste.²¹ The vast majority of this “trimming” is carried out on the basis of aesthetic—that is to say, visual—criteria. The Florida Tomato Committee, for example, “decrees the exact size, color, texture, and shape of exported slicing tomatoes. It prevents the shipping of tomatoes that are lopsided, kidney-shaped, elongated, angular, ridged, rough, or otherwise ‘deformed.’”²² As should be clear, none of these regulations have anything to do with the safety, taste, or nutritional value of tomatoes. By all accounts, this summary judgment and execution of food based on sight is getting stricter. While wholesalers 40 years ago could sell lettuce with a few holes in the outer leaves, these same plants would be rejected by even bargain supermarkets today.²³

²⁰ (Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Merchant 1989).

²¹ (Institution of Mechanical Engineers 2013:23).

²² (Estabrook 2011:123).

²³ (Pimentel 1990:14). Bloom (2010:Ch.5) chronicles the decline of secondary markets for imperfect produce.

Supermarkets invariably claim that, in offering immaculate produce, they are only responding to consumer demand.²⁴ Placing blame is, in this case, something of a chicken-or-the-egg problem that misses how consumers and producers are bound up in the same system. As Madeline framed it at one freeganism 101 event:

Our society wants blemish-free food. So when food is not perfect, the stores try to get it out of sight as quickly as possible. It's not individuals, it's the system. The stores are trying to extract surplus value, to borrow a Marxist term. But our system ends up with a huge amount of waste and unrecognized costs.

However we apportion the culpability, the impacts of our collective obsession with appearance are clear. Consumers get perfect (looking) produce, stores increase profits in a competitive market by incorporating the price of culled fruits and vegetables into what they sell, and huge amounts of “waste”—really, completely edible ex-commodities, albeit in non-standard shapes and sizes—fall out in the shuffle.

Freegan practices relating to food require the senses to be attuned in a different way. Writing of her own experiences working with waste in New York, Robin Nagle found that “When garbage is the organizing frame of reference, familiar geographies are radically changed... instead of upscale residential blocks lined with lovely homes and trees, I saw clots of dark bags, metal cans, plastic bins that went on and on and on.”²⁵ Similarly, my own experience of becoming a dumpster diver meant turning away from the neon signs, advertisements, and

²⁴ Nestle (2002:359) quotes one food industry spokesman saying “Food consumption is not supply driven, it is demand driven, and consumers are in the driver’s seat.” In Europe, on the other hand, supermarkets frequently attribute their cosmetic criteria to government regulation, even though almost all retailers have stricter standards than those legally required (Stuart 2009:108).

²⁵ (2013:49).

store-window displays that to me had previously signaled the presence of commodities for purchase. Instead, I had to pay attention to subtle and difficult to discern hints that gave away the presence of *ex*-commodities, such as the faint smell of food or a store employee walking back inside after depositing trash bags on the curb.

The senses are necessary not just for finding food but also separating out the *ex*-commodities from the genuine garbage. Before opening a bag, experienced freegans feel them from the outside: soft, rounded lumps could mean food, while more angular ones suggest discarded packaging. Sight, freegans frequently emphasized, could be misleading. Indeed, we could argue that the notion that if something looks bad, it *is* bad, is one aspect of the fetish of waste. In response to question about the health of dumpster-dived food during one presentation to a class at New York University, Adam shot back, “We have false ideas about what constitutes fresh food. A lot of food tastes better when it looks worse. But those are not the tactile and aesthetic qualities people look for when they purchase produce.” Outside of one grocery store in the trash tour afterward, Adam discovered a bin filled with discarded tofu, chicken, and cheese from the store’s hot food salad bar. As a vegan, Adam wanted only the tofu, but in the darkness, the difference was hard to see. Adam fearlessly plunged into the mixture and pulled out a sauce-covered white chunk, explaining how to identify whether it was meat based on its texture and the way it broke when crushed between the thumb and forefinger.

Freegans emphasized that developing one’s senses was key to determining what dumpster-dived food was safe to eat. Once again, in so doing, freegans were bucking the wider cultural trend. Modern Western societies are “risk societies,”²⁶ insofar as most individuals feel hemmed in by a steadily proliferating range of technological and ecological dangers, from

²⁶ (Beck 1992).

climate change to cell-phone radio waves. Playing on fears of technological hazards is a fruitful way to sell commodities designed to protect us, ranging from organic food to natural cleaning products to bottled water.²⁷ These fears also lead to waste. In a context where few people have direct knowledge of where their food comes from or how it is produced, “use-by” “sell-by” and “best-before” dates have proliferated to fill gaps of trust between consumers and actors up the supply chain.²⁸ Although infant formula and baby-food are the only items the U.S. government legally requires to have labels, almost everything—from bread to pasta to beer—usually carries them anyway.²⁹ Surveys find that only 15% of consumers correctly understand date labels, and one study observed that consumers cited labels in explaining 30% of instances of wasting food.³⁰ As with aesthetic standards, we don’t need to believe in secret scheming to recognize who benefits from this situation. Producers, processors, distributors, and retailers all make more money when consumers don’t trust their own senses and instead throw out food that has passed a conservative sell-by date.

Once again, freegans reframed the practicalities of surviving off of dumpstered food into a form of direct action that challenged the primacy of sell-by dates and sight in determining what is, and is not, good to eat. In response to one of the frequent queries newcomers make about food safety, an experienced freegan quipped, “I never look at the sell-by date, it’s irrelevant to me. It’s about the condition of the food: you smell it, you taste it, and if it’s horrible, don’t [eat it].” Eating safely meant cultivating knowledge of the material properties of food, knowledge which freegans claim had been lost with urbanization:

²⁷ Szasz (2007)

²⁸ (Gille 2012; Milne 2012; Watson and Meah 2012).

²⁹ Bloom (2010:166).

³⁰ Lyndhurst (2011:20,35).

Not knowing about food, and thinking about safety standards, that comes from living in the city... If you take a yogurt, and you don't know what it is and you don't know how it's made, and all you know is the expiration date, then after the expiration date you'll throw it away. If you know how a yogurt works, you know it could be good two months after. You just taste it.

By becoming “experts on food,” freegans were thus able to use their knowledge of and relationships to physical objects to implement ideals of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and sustainability through prefigurative bodily practices.

The irony is that freegans actually know very little about where their food comes from. In contrast to organic and local food movements that are obsessed with intimate consumer knowledge of and proximity to food's origins,³¹ freegans are often unsure of why the food they find is in the dumpster at all. An item might be thrown out due to the store over-ordering and minor blemishes and decay, neither of which changes the food's physical properties or capacity to nourish. On the other hand, large quantities of certain types of food waste—such as a surfeit of peanut butter that appeared one summer—might be due to a product recalled because it is genuinely unsafe.

Nonetheless, when reporters ask, “Does anyone ever get sick?”—and they always do—freegans almost always respond that no one ever does.³² In part, they explain, freegans are careful to clean the food they rescue before eating it and are smart enough to recognize when something is truly trash. They also use the question of hygiene to make a political point: as the

³¹ (see Johnston 2008).

³² One exception came when Leia's partner, Tate, admitted to *Marie Claire* that he had gotten sick from eating day-old sushi (Goodwin 2009). On an auto-ethnographic note, over the course of seven years I have never gotten sick from eating dumpstered food.

website's "Health and Safety" page points out, "Dumpster diving plant-based items that have been discarded by stores is probably safer than a buying animal products from the shelf and bringing them home"³³

There's no question, however, that experienced freegans push the boundaries of what constitutes "edible" food. As Janet confessed, "I mean, we wouldn't do this if it were totally disgusting. But the line between what's edible and what's not edible definitely shifts a little bit." Many freegans put stock in the "hygiene hypothesis,"³⁴ a notion circulating in punk, anarchist, and back-to-the-land communities that modern hygiene has weakened humanity's natural resistance to disease. As Janet elaborated during one freeganism 101 event:

We're all raised to think garbage is dirty: 'Don't touch that. That's been on the floor.

That's been in the garbage.' Most of us probably have strong immune systems and touch things all over the place that are germy... The first time I went on a trash tour I didn't take anything like an apple or pear, I only took citrus, like an orange or a banana. Now I'm braver and I just wash them well, and if I'm not sure I'll peel them. But now I take almost everything.

Leia put it more succinctly: "People in this country are a lot more freaked out about dirt than they need to be. We need a little dirt in our lives for our immune systems to be strong."

Eating slightly rotten and over-the-hill foods thus served as personal affirmations of a commitment to an alternative lifestyle, as well as a marker of freegans' commitment to living more naturally. Playing with hygienic standards, though, was also one of the most attention-grabbing aspects of freegans' symbolic critique of capitalism. As anthropologist Mary Douglas

³³ <http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-practices/urban-foraging/health-and-safety-issues/>

³⁴ (Clark 2004:22; Edwards and Mercer 2007:389).

famously chronicled, all societies hold powerful “pollution rules” that separates the clean and dirty, sacred and profane, virtuous and wicked.³⁵ Some scientific research even suggests that “disgust” is an emotion with a strong evolutionary basis, helping us to avoid disease.³⁶

When freegans eat “polluted” food and show that it is still good, they attempt to flip the object of our disgust onto the store managers, consumers, and social norms that led to ex-commodification. The perfect example came when an ABC reporter asked: “What do you say to people who say, ‘There you are on the street, digging through trash, this is gross, this is disgusting.’”

You could almost hear Madeline’s corporate communications experience when she replied: “Well, I’d say what’s gross and disgusting is the fact that this food is being thrown out in the first place.”³⁷

As Lisa, a middle-aged, well-dressed woman, reflected after one trash tour: “I think it’s funny that there’s this stigma against eating from the trash, but there’s no stigma against putting it in there in the first place. And think about it; that tomato on the shelf, you have no idea where it was fifteen minutes ago. It could have been on the floor!”³⁸ As freegans show, the fetishism of waste partly comes through our use of sight and conceptions of hygiene; by adopting new practices and norms, freegans challenge this fetishism.

The Rhythm of Freeganism

Freegans’ dumpster dives and other acts are also prefigurative insofar as they enact rhythms of daily life at odds with the temporal structures of capitalist society. A central tenet of a

³⁵ (1966).

³⁶ (Curtis, Barra, and Aunger 2011).

³⁷ Ows and Yeo (2007).

³⁸ This concept of “reverse stigma” is further developed by Nguyen et al. (2013)

Marxist analysis of capitalism is that capitalism depends on the control of people's time in order to produce value and profit.³⁹ Growth, as a whole, depends on constant acceleration: it is not enough simply that people produce and consume more, but that they produce and consume *faster*.⁴⁰ For individuals living under capitalism, the discipline of "clock time"⁴¹ entails a separation between time spent in public and private, work and leisure, production and consumption.⁴²

Superficially, freegans celebrated the way their lifestyle "liberated" them from the temporal dictates of capitalism, allowing them to spend more time engaged in unpaid activities with more flexible, task-oriented schedules. Janet told me that, "There's a hugely freeing sense to know that anytime I'm hungry, I can go a few blocks and find something. It almost feels like this city is more mine than it ever was before." For his part, Zaac felt that his involvement in freeganism had opened his eyes to the flaws of the rigidly segmented, linear conception of time he saw around him, as well as pointing to an alternative:

People have this notion of going through life as fast as possible. You get a job, and then you've got it as fast as possible, and retire, get along with life, and I feel like foraging as well as a lot of notions pointed out within freegan.info, within a wider context, disprove that theory that this is the way that life is.

To him, freeganism challenged the "forced dichotomy" between being environmentalist and working for a living by allowing him to be both at the same time—not in the sense of having a job for an environmentalist organization, but by actually embodying his environmental beliefs in

³⁹ (Marx 1976; see also Burawoy 1979).

⁴⁰ (Hart 2002; Harvey 1996).

⁴¹ (Simmel 1957).

⁴² (Adam 1994; Zerubavel 1985).

everyday practice. For him, nothing encapsulated freegan beliefs with respect to time better than his long bike trip to Canada. When he told others about his plans, he noted, “They all said ‘You’re going to die. You’re going to get sick. The weather is going to be bad.’ But it always works out. You stop and pick things up along the way. It’s problematic, but it always works out.”

Despite claims of personal liberation, though, freegans’ deep-seated desire to turn the flow of time into an ongoing series of direct actions created its own constraints. Although food is wasted at predictable places and times, other items freegans need to find in order to avoid spending money—clothes, toiletries, and appliances, to name a few—appear only stochastically. As a result, a committed freegan must *always* be on the lookout. One evening, the group was walking from an organizational meeting to the site of the trash tour. On the way, we came upon a dumpster filled with reams of quality printer paper—a rare find that could be used for producing, guilt-free, fliers and pamphlets. The group spent nearly a half-hour collecting it, even though it made them so late for the subsequent tour that, when they arrived, the attendees had already left. As freegans emphasized, other non-capitalist mechanisms for getting goods—such as waiting for an item to appear on “Freecycle” or for a friend to pass on a used one—nearly always “worked,” but also entailed postponing the comforts of consumption for an indeterminate amount of time.

When I began to dumpster-dive necessities myself, I realized that traversing the city on foot took much longer than it had previously. I zig-zagged across streets in order to examine any garbage that looked remotely promising, paying far more attention to the journey itself—and what I could find during it—than to reaching my destination. I struggled to maintain a barrier between time spent “diving” and time spent “not-diving,” reflective of the broader breakdown in binaries like “work” and “leisure” that freeganism fosters. For the majority of freegans who continued to live with one foot in capitalist-time—holding normal jobs or socializing with non-

freegans—this aspect of prefigurative politics could be a challenging one. I myself often missed the last train back to New Jersey owing to the slow, non-deliberate pace with which Adam combed the city at night for useful waste.

Food is more reliably available than other kinds of ex-commodities, yet constraining in its own way. While a grocery store might be open sixteen hours a day, the window of time for dumpster diving is just a few hours between when stores close and garbage trucks appear. One night, I was working in the freegan office with Adam when he looked at the time on his computer and said, “It’s eight-thirty. We can almost get dinner.” Without access to a refrigerator or kitchen, eating like a forager—for Adam—meant gathering food at the times it was available and going without otherwise. Marion articulated how dumpster diving required a mix of patience, skill, and self-abnegation:

I try to project and say ‘This is what I have, I probably won’t go on this day because of the weather.’ But I have to plan in advance to make sure I’m prepared. Usually I know when the stores are closed, and that means that, usually, ten to midnight is the good range. It gets laborious, to stay on the street, late *late* at night, day after day. So I try to limit it to get what I need, at least. It can so easily turn into still [being] on the street at 1:30 in the morning. It’s exhausting for me.

As Marion elaborated, freegans must save—some would say hoard—goods for when they might need them:

Marion: There’s no item that I can’t find. It takes diligence and you can’t really go out and say, ‘I need an orange right now.’ Well, with oranges, you almost can, but with some things, you can’t. I have the most bizarre collection of stuff, because I do this and think the need for it may come up later, but it’s such a bizarre item that I will take it.

AB: *Any good examples?*

Marion: An industrial-sized bag of arrowroot, and I use about half a teaspoon a year.

That's an obscure item. Syrup. Things that are not consumed on an everyday basis but you might need every six months. I would emphasize that no matter what your proclivities are, you can accommodate yourself, if you're vegan or kosher or a carnivore or nut-allergic, whatever, you can do this and have your needs met, as long as you know what they are.

Over the *longue durée*, I began to see the planning and foresight required to even partly pull back from the money economy. Back-to-school season, for example, was harvest time for office supplies; college move-outs in May presented a unique opportunity to find instant oatmeal and other non-perishables. The winter, according to Janet, was a good time to find tissues, because so many people had colds.

Although most freegans continued to have jobs, these practices of urban foraging really do reduce the need for freegans to commodify and sell their labor by allowing them to get some *ex-commodities* for free. Yet, as one scholar pointed out, while freegans substitute “working for food” over “working to pay for food”⁴³ they are nonetheless still *working*. But the implications of each pattern of work are distinct. Research shows a consistent, steady decline in hours of leisure and increase in hours of paid work (for those Americans who still have jobs).⁴⁴ This is mirrored by a constant downward march in time spent on food: the average American spends only 42 minutes a day eating at home, and even less cooking and washing up.⁴⁵

⁴³ (Gross 2009:62).

⁴⁴ (Schor 1991).

⁴⁵ Warde et al. (2007:367).

Less time spent preparing food creates more need for buying pre-packaged, pre-prepared food, which, because it is more expensive, in turn creates the need to earn (and therefore, work) more.⁴⁶ As always, we can argue over whether neo-liberal restructuring or consumer laziness is responsible for this shift from whole, raw foods to pre-processed ones: as with aesthetic standards, producers claim they are just giving people what they want.⁴⁷ Although food packaging like tin cans may have initially reduced food waste,⁴⁸ there is clear evidence that processed or cooked offerings from supermarkets, like baby carrots, rotisserie chickens, or hot-salad bars, are wasted at higher rates than their unprocessed counterparts.⁴⁹ The materiality of food, after all, is “unforgiving”⁵⁰: cut skins or removing peels drastically diminishes food’s shelf life. As with baked goods, stores make up for the food they waste as ex-commodities with the price mark-up on the commodities they sell. The best evidence of this comes from the dumpsters themselves: on trash tours, we find far more cut pineapple than entire fruits, more individually-packaged pasta salads than dry pasta; more baked goods than flour, eggs, or sugar.

By recovering pre-prepared or packaged food, freegans believe they are rejecting the logic of the food system that produced them. But they are also cultivating values and practices that could have a more significant, if indirect, impact on waste. Packaging, as some scholars have argued, helps bring into being a world where people trust labels, not their senses, to tell them what food is good and rely on industrial machines, rather than their own skills, to cook it.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Effectively confirming Ropke’s (2009) claim that there is a correlation between the perceived scarcity of time and the resource intensity of individual lifestyles.

⁴⁷ Thorgensen (1996:292).

⁴⁸ Naylor (2000).

⁴⁹ Bloom (2010:170).

⁵⁰ Evans (2011:11).

⁵¹ Hawkins (2012). Although linear narratives of de-skilling in the kitchen have been critiqued for demonizing the present and apotheosizing the past (Meah and Watson 2011), there does seem

The availability of more varied and complex ingredients year-round, and our lessened ability to make use of them, leads inexorably to waste.⁵²

Freegans saw dumpster-diving as a way of re-training themselves to use food in more creative ways. Explained Maximus, one freegan in Boston I interviewed:

Most people walk into the kitchen and think, ‘What do I want?’ which quickly transforms into, ‘What product should I buy?’ We think differently. When we walk into the kitchen, we ask, ‘What do we have? What can we make with it?’ We use whatever resources we have available.

Freeganism, as should be clear, takes time: it requires rejecting some of the conveniences provided for us by our food system (a fact which helps explain why freegans struggle to reach out to harried and over-worked middle-class and lower-class people—more on that in the next chapter). Yet unlike wage labor in capitalist society—which produces commodities whose origins are “fetishized” and invisible, even to the laborers themselves—freegans understood what their labor was going towards: a new system of values that cherished time spent on food, recovered lost skills, and accepted unpredictability.

Skills, Knowledge, and the Freegan Bike Workshop

After one freegan feast in Jason’s apartment, eight of us stayed around to watch Zaac conduct a “skillshare” for the group. Zaac removed a handful of yucca leaves and placed them on the floor. He demonstrated how to scrape off the flesh of the yucca leaf, leaving only the internal fibers, which we then attempted to weave into cord. After half an hour, Zaac had created a

to be more than just a neutral, qualitative shift when we go from slaughtering and dressing a pig to putting pigs-in-a-blanket in the microwave.

⁵² Rathje and Murphy’s (1992:62) “First principle of food waste” from their archeological forays into America’s dump is that “The more repetitive the diet, the less waste.”

drawstring for his hat, while the rest of us had a few sloppy, short strands of what could only optimistically be described as “rope.” Nevertheless, no one seemed dispirited: instead, the group was so enthralled by the event that, immediately after, they began discussing plans for similar trainings in canning and preserving fruit, sewing clothes, and making wine.

As with wild food foraging, these do-it-yourself skill-shares are impractical ways to meet material needs. In the city, even a modestly experienced dumpster diver could easily find discarded rope without the exertion required to weave it him or herself. By taking yucca leaves from outside a gas station and reworking them, though, freegans showed how objects connected to what they saw as the worst aspects of the city—cars and fossil fuels—could be imbued with radically different moral meaning.

The power of manual skills in enabling these transformations was, according to many respondents, a core element of freegan practice. During one event where Janet, Adam, and Wendy were speaking to a class at NYU, Adam lectured the group about the uselessness of their formal educations: “We live in a profoundly de-skilled society. We’ve been infantilized, and very few of us know how to do anything outside of our little narrow box of employment.”⁵³ One interviewee explained how he was countering this perceived “de-skilling”:

I believe in autonomy. I try to be as un-reliant on the systems that surround me as possible...Being self-sufficient is important to me. In the last few years, I’ve learned a lot about sewing. I’m a good carpenter. I’m a potter. I’m very interested in acquiring tools and skills.

⁵³ Once again, Marx would be proud. As he wrote, “Unfitted by nature to make anything independently, the manufacturing worker develops his productive activity only as an appendage of [his] workshop” (1976:482).

Activities like “mending brunches,” where freegans met to share fabric, food, and sewing tips, provided a chance for freegans to help each other achieve this goal of autonomy and re-skilling in their own way. As Anna told me after one sewing event:

We’re so used to not doing anything with our hands, we’re reminding ourselves that we have those skills. It’s something that’s always been done, that we can easily pick up again. It’s only been one generation, and we’ve lost sewing. Our mothers could sew. So, there, it’s not a huge difference.

In some ways, “re-skilling” reached less far back than more primitivist survival skills, harkening to the imagined lost thriftiness and independence of freegans’ parents or grandparents.

Madeline once explained to me that freeganism was not “pie in the sky” but instead all about “making use of the resources at hand.” In keeping with this ethos, when it began to rain during one trash tour, Christian fashioned a makeshift umbrella out of a piece of Styrofoam and a metal pole he found on the sidewalk, while the rest of the group—and some of the media—clustered around to offer their praise. These skills were not just about showing off or creating distinctions from the mainstream, but had real and material impacts on freegans’ lives. Lola explained how learning how to sew contributed to withdrawing from capitalism:

Clothing is something that’s really easy not to buy. I don’t even remember the last time I bought clothes. That’s something that people just assume you have to do. If you have a hole, you buy new pants. If your shirt is too short, you buy a new shirt. A lot of people see that I wear really ratty and crusty clothes and so they assume they have to give me clothes. At first I thought that was generous. But now I’ve realized that’s just another crutch, because I’d rather just learn to make my own.

Even basic skills thus helped freegans make do with less and further reduce their purchasing.

Alongside learning to sew, for Lola, one of the most important ways to express her simultaneous commitment to re-skilling and reducing consumption was bicycling. When she first became involved in freeganism, she recovered a few abandoned bicycles but they were all “really, really crappy” and she lacked the knowledge to fix them up. When I met her, though, she proudly showed-off the fixed gear bike she built, noting, “I know every part of it and understand why and how everything works. And to do that, I had to learn where every one [of the parts] came from, how it developed.” For her, understanding the material properties of her bicycle was crucial: it allowed her to maintain it without paying for repairs, as well as a provided a way of directly enacting her commitment to self-sufficiency and sustainability. What is more, bicycling through Manhattan provided another way of transcending the un-naturalness of the city:

Bicycling is such a freeing feeling. You’re in direct contact with nature. The physical aspect of it is amazing. It feels to me like breaking through some kind of invisible barrier...You can’t fall asleep on a fixed gear [bicycle]. You can’t just ignore things that are going on. You can’t just look up at the stars; it’s actually being in contact and being directly involved with what is happening.

When Lola spent a stint housesitting a luxurious apartment in the Upper West Side, she confided to me, “It felt really weird, so I brought my bike into my bedroom with me, just as a reminder.” Lola’s bicycle functioned as a personal symbol of her commitment to freegan values—despite the contradiction that staying in the apartment of an affluent family friend represented.

Lola was far from alone in seeing bicycling as an iconic freegan activity. Other participants came to the group through their involvement in direct-action bicycle groups like New York’s “Time’s Up.” The group’s appreciation of radical bike culture was demonstrated by their careful avoidance of scheduling conflicts with Critical Mass’ monthly take-back-the-streets

bike rides through Manhattan.⁵⁴ Most notable, however, was the freegan bike workshop, a project founded by Christian in 2007. Initially, the project was housed in a space in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where, according to one account, it primarily attracted “bike aficionados.”⁵⁵ When it lost its lease later that year, though, the bike workshop moved to the basement of 123 in Bedford Stuyvesant.

Like every freegan.info project, the bike workshop was riven with inconsistencies. Although Wendy described the workshop’s \$600 a month rent as an “absolute bargain” for a storefront in Brooklyn, making rent was a constant problem. The first thing I encountered on entering the “free” freegan bike workshop and asking about building a bike was a request for a twenty-five dollar donation—although the mechanic added that I could volunteer a few hours in lieu of a payment. At times, the group debated whether the bike workshop could even be considered “freegan”: first, because of fundraisers and parties the various activist collectives running 123 threw to make rent, and second, because some mechanics began selling bike parts off-site to cover shortfalls. Eventually, the workshop filed for non-profit status so that it could give donors a tax write-off—a level of formal legitimation that some disdained.⁵⁶

Despite these external problems, the inside of the bike workshop was an oasis where freegans could demonstrate and share principles of careful resource use, waste recovery, and personal empowerment. Like most freegan.info participants, Quinn—a tall, thin freegan in his

⁵⁴ For discussion of the role of bicycles in urban youth subculture and anarchism, see (Carlsson 2008:Ch.6; Fincham 2007; Kidder 2009).

⁵⁵ (Ernst 2009:86).

⁵⁶ Carlson (2008:123) describes a similar situation confronting DIY bike shops around the country: “Facing daunting problems of sustainability, they exist on the verge of co-optation. Everyday rent and survival confront DIY bikeshop staffers with the necessity of making money. This in turn pushes them towards converting cooperative spaces based on sharing and mutual aid into small businesses. The flow of cash, even within official non-profits, inexorably begins to shape decisions and behaviors.”

mid-20s, with shoulder-length curly red hair—came from a privileged background and went to an elite university, where he studied computer science. Quinn met Christian at the National Conference for Organized Resistance, an anarchist event in Washington DC, and Christian convinced him to come to the freegan bike workshop. Quinn spent six weeks building his own bike from scratch, starting from just the triangle in the center of the frame. Despite having access to a well-regarded formal education, Quinn found this manual work far more rewarding: “It was the first time I felt like I could do whatever I wanted without spending six years training for it.” Wendy, who along with Quinn was one of the workshop’s “bottom-liners” in 2009, expressed a similar sense of exhilaration about her first experience with bike repair: “I realized that I could build and create things—figure out how to do stuff, solve problems, use tools.”

Perhaps more importantly, they also realized that they could share those skills with others. One night, a man came down the stairs into the basement and asked, “Hey, can I buy a bike?” to which Jason replied, “No, but I’ll show you how to build one.” For Wendy, Jason, and Quinn, the labor they put in at the bike workshop was about much more than just personal, self-directed development. In truth, focusing on their own bikes would have been impossible even had they wanted to: on the nights I spent at 123, the space was overrun with local children who appeared night after night to socialize, play, and learn about bikes. Quinn spoke with pride about how the bike workshop provided a non-hierarchical and un-policed space for neighborhood youth to learn from the mechanics and from each other:

Part of the space was this idea of non-hierarchy and anti-oppression, horizontality. There weren’t teachers and students permanently. If you knew how to do anything, you became a teacher of that skill. So if a kid learned something, they were given a status upgrade,

and they could start teaching. It was decentralized. People were getting things done, but not from a center.

As I observed firsthand, visitors to the bike workshop could work for five minutes or six hours, and could complete a bike from scratch in a few weeks or leave it half completed for months (which helped explain why the space was so cluttered). When I re-interviewed Quinn in 2012, he had taken a job as a teacher at a public school—an environment he saw as far less conducive to learning than the bike workshop: “Working with your hands is, it’s like, so critical to being a human being. Being able to manipulate your environment and physical things—kids are not taught that at school. If they are, it’s an elective thought to be a lesser subject.” I cannot evaluate whether attendees who used the bike workshop left with these freegan values or just newly built or repaired bikes. Nevertheless, it was clear that a significant number of people of color from the surrounding community felt comfortable coming to the bike workshop for repairs or free parts—despite the fact that nearly all the original mechanics were white.

Predictably, waste was instrumental in the workshop’s functioning. Although the bike workshop did need to pay rent, freegan activists recovered most of the parts and tools they needed from dumpsters and abandoned bikes along the street. As Wendy admitted, the freegan approach meant that, compared to other community bike workshops in the city, they were “way less organized—and way cheaper.” The availability of waste facilitated the bike workshop in other, less direct ways. For one thing, dumpster diving for ex-commodities meant that Quinn and Wendy could de-commodify some time that would otherwise have been sold on the labor market and put it towards helping others.

As always, though, “waste” was more than just a material resource. Working with waste was also profoundly prefigurative, showing freegan values at their height. For one, by using

once-discarded bike parts—rather than store bought ones—freegans had to rely on their own knowledge and one another to determine if they were still useable. On one trash tour, we encountered a few bicycle rims in a trashcan. Jason pulled one out and spun it between his hands, as each of us speculated as to whether the wheel was salvageable. The bikes that came out of the other end of the bike workshop were representative of how resources deemed valueless under capitalism could turn into objects that can provide sustainable transportation for years.

Although freegans were far from being able to provide for all their material needs through skills like bike repair or sewing, small-scale prefigurative experiments like the bike workshop suggested that they *could* do so in a way that was egalitarian, non-hierarchical, and sustainable. While these activities may not look “political” by a conventional definition, their broader implications should not be missed. After all, as Emily Sullivan writes, “It is difficult to run a capitalist economy if people believe they are naturally equipped with all of the tools necessary for their own fulfilling survival.”⁵⁷

Festivals of Use Value and the Gift Economy

Published accounts from first-time dumpster-divers often enthusiastically describe the “value” of the goods they find in terms of their price—that is to say, their *exchange* value.⁵⁸ In these narratives, the hauls from dumpster dives are tabulated like the takings from a shopping spree at an everything-must-go close-out sale. Yet among the activists of freegan.info, I’ve almost never heard value discussed in these terms. They certainly could—items are often found with price stickers attached—but looking through my field notes, I could not find a single instance where they actually added up the dollar value of what they found. In fact, freegans

⁵⁷ (2011:46).

⁵⁸ (Donovan 2012:19; More 2011:19; Nagle 2013:67).

actively refuse to think of the items they recover through the market language of price. Instead, they focused on their use value—their capacity to meet human needs. As Maximus, the dumpster diver from Boston, summarized: “The capitalist system we live in insists that for something to have value, it needs to be sellable. We believe that in order for something to have value, it need not be sellable, only useable.”

Often, freegans’ attempts to rethink the value of commodities started with small, isolated attempts to conserve resources. Janet, for example, talked about rescuing paper from the recycling bins at her school and using junk mail envelopes to write her lesson plans. At meetings where the freegan.info events for the upcoming month were to be discussed, Janet would often bring the pages of old wall calendars that she had rescued, which she had laboriously re-numbered to correspond to the correct month. For Janet, avoiding waste required thinking in terms of goods’ material condition and serviceability—not their aesthetic qualities or capacity to be sold. As she told the attendees at one “freeganism 101,” displaying a woven pink glove and a synthetic black one:

I have mismatched gloves myself. These are really good gloves, good for this weather. You know, they’re really warm...I think people find it odd if your gloves don’t match, but why? What I do is I find one—you can find a glove almost every day if you look for it—and you pick up a glove and then you wash it, it becomes just part of your wardrobe. I carry a bunch around.

Enthusiasm for finding less-than-obvious ways to recover use value was thus something Janet shared with many others in the group. Leia, for her part, told me how she delighted in recovering single earrings that women had dropped or discarded after losing their match: “I love finding use in things and value in things that other people think of as garbage,” she added.

Yet for freegans, use value could not be defined solely in individual terms. There was no way Janet could eat the dozen jars of \$4.99 Veganaise she found one day in any reasonable time period, so she shared it with people who *could* realize its use value. Such actions were small steps towards implementing a “gift economy,” an economic vision in which goods are neither sold nor bartered but shared freely.⁵⁹ During one “waving the banana” speech, Adam announced that, “Capitalism measures success not in terms of whether people’s needs are met. They measure it in terms of profit. As such, sharing is a frontal assault in a society based on greed.”

Regular freegan meetings provided a venue for informal sharing along gift-economy lines. At one gathering in Grand Central Station, Evie opened her bag and pulled out some dumpstered sunflower-seed crackers and old hummus her parents had given her (“They figured, ‘It’s expired, but Evie eats garbage’”). Zaac added some Odwalla bars, while Quinn contributed some fancy Pom juice. Adam simply walked around the nearby garbage bins, pulled out takeout containers with leftover food, and brought them to the table. As any newcomer no doubt found, attendees at a freegan meeting will quite literally have freegans’ prefigurative politics pushed on them in the form of freely gifted food. The quasi-ritualistic sharing of recent dumpstered-finds with which nearly all freegan meetings begin also has a more practical function. Vegan sources of protein like tofu, dried goods such as pasta, and olive oil are all rare finds—so much that they constitute some of freegans’ infrequent food purchases. When freegans do find them, though, they typically find them in bulk and distribute them at freegan meetings.

Freegans’ occasionally take their attempts to enact their calls for a gift economy into a more public register. Once a year, freegan.info organizes a “Dorm Dive” on the Lower East Side to gather non-food items discarded by NYU students leaving for the summer. In 2012, I arrived

⁵⁹ See Graeber (2004).

early for the dorm dive, but Marion was already there, barely visible over the lip of a huge open-top dumpster parked by the side of the street. The rim of the dumpster was already lined with items that she didn't need, but figured someone else might: a half-eaten jar of peanut butter, a single leather boot, and some notebooks. I climbed in. Aside from bedding, there was a smorgasbord of half-eaten food like cereal boxes or pasta, a huge number of mesh laundry bags, cardboard boxes, loose paper, and appliances. I found some coffee filters: "Want this?" I asked.

Marion replied, "I'm waiting to see if we can find the coffee-maker that goes with it. I think I saw it in there."

Another diver then joined us—a younger white man wearing a bike messenger hat and with large plugs in his ears. He saw the cell-phone on the edge and said to me excitedly, "Check this out."

I replied, "It's probably dead."

"No, man, it just needs a charger. Let me know if you see one," he responded.

As the two of us worked, we called out items that might be of interest: "There are all kinds of spices over here!" he exclaimed excitedly, "I could totally use this canteen!" before adding, "I love this time of year." Down the street, two young women were going through black bags piled on the curb. "Anyone have a hamster?" the young woman asked as she pulled out some pet food. She added after an audible sigh, "It looks like a lot of people just put all the stuff they didn't want in their laundry hampers and chucked them out. It's ridiculous. There's a thrift store two blocks from here."

The NYU Dorm Dive is, in effect, a "festival of use value." No one seemed to have come with a particular idea of what they actually needed, except for one man who said he was hoping to find a pen. Instead, the focus was on finding wasted goods and coming up with ways that they

might be useful to someone. The event had a carnival-esque air as we playfully re-imagined how torn posters could be taped together into works of art or half-eaten food could be turned into delicious meals. While it's certainly possible that someone would want to exchange or resell the things we found, I didn't get the impression that anyone was intending to do so: instead, as the "anyone have a hamster?" query indicated, the focus was on connecting use values to users. Such a connection doesn't always happen immediately. When I talked to Janet the next week, she said that she had come home from the dorm dive with far too many towels: "I don't really have any use for them," she explained, "But they're more useful with me than in the trash. I hate to think that they were all produced just one year ago and they've already been thrown out." No doubt she would be redistributing them at freegan events for months to come.

The ultimate festival of use value, however, is the "Really Really Free Market" (RRFM), a monthly event that freegan.info helped organize alongside the In Our Hearts collective and other New York anarchist groups. RRFMs emerged in the early 2000s in cities across the U.S., when anti-globalization movement activists began taking their models of consensus-based organizing and mutual aid and applying them to more routine aspects of social life. As the New York website describes it, "The Really Really Free Market is a bazaar & celebration, where capitalist notions of interaction are discarded...No Money. No Barter. No Trade. Try a new economic model: sharing!"⁶⁰

During the summers, RRFMs were held outside in lower Manhattan; in the winter, inside of left-wing churches. Before the events, an eclectic group would turn up, ranging from punks with dyed mohawks and studded jackets carrying excess finds from recent dives to white-haired patrons of the church with unneeded clutter from apartments. At one RRFM in winter 2008,

⁶⁰ <http://rrfm-nyc.blogspot.com/>

there were tables heaped with books, appliances, and clothing. There were also free services on offer: free advice, basic dental work, tarot card readings, portraits, and guitar lessons. Madeline sat behind two boxes labeled “singles”—right- and left-handed gloves without a partner—while her partner Michael gave lessons in darning socks. Janet, Cindy, and Evie were in the back kitchen, preparing a spread of dumpstered fruit, iced tea, salad, bread and hummus, and pasta. As one bearded punk exclaimed when he approached freegan.info’s table, “I feel as lost here as I do in the supermarket. There’s just too much selection!”

RRFMs facilitated a minimal-purchasing lifestyle for freegans and other activists who took part in them by circulating “use value” to those who needed it. Jason explained how the RRFM functioned to bring a gift economy into being:

It’s just the idea of utilizing things that aren’t for sale. Finding things that have been discarded and collecting them together and sharing them, and creating networks not just for yourself, but around that—sharing... There really is just all this free stuff, and why can’t we have access to it? We can use it to better ourselves. It allows people that aren’t rich to have this community wealth.

As a space where participants in a wide range of anarchist collectives and movements were gathered at the same time, RRFM’s also disseminated information about New York’s anarchist scene: indeed, the events were frequently punctuated with announcements of upcoming direct actions. But the events drew a much wider audience, whether measured in terms of race, age, or gender. While many of them may not have been inspired by an anti-capitalist ideology, they were nonetheless participating in an event that subverted capitalism’s basic logic: that commodities should be exchanged for money, not freely shared based on need.

In my discussion of neo-liberalism, I pointed out that we live in an era where the market is expanding to new reaches of social life, and things that have historically not been commodified now have exchange value attached to them. This process has provoked its fair share of resistance, as social movements seek to “fence-off non-market spheres from market encroachments.”⁶¹ Even in the face of the neo-liberal onslaught, though, our lives are filled with moments and activities we would never think to trade on a market. As one freegan pamphlet pointed out, “We freely offer rides in our vehicles when family members need to go someplace; we don't charge for washing dishes after a meal; and we counsel grieving friends without sending a bill.”⁶²

What freegans do through activities like RRFMs and Dorm Dives is expand this already-existing gift economy to arenas of economic life that have long-since been brought under the market. As with other freegan visions for a society beyond capitalism, a full-scale gift economy was far from having taken shape: freegans could not “gift” each other places to live or health insurance. Discourse about “re-skilling” aside, freegans lacked the time, resources, and skills to actually *produce* the goods they shared with one another. It was only by taking advantage of the flaws in the waste fetish—the failure to fully keep ex-commodities hidden—that they could develop new ways of distributing use value, even before they figured out how to actually *create* it in the first place.

De-Constructing Waste, Re-Constructing Nature

This chapter has gone beyond freegan.info’s polemics to examine the prefigurative side of freeganism—the group’s attempts to construct a “new society in the shell of the old,” as Adam

⁶¹ Vail (2010:313).

⁶² (Anon n.d.:55; see also Graeber 2011; White and Williams 2012).

was fond of saying. As should be clear, freeganism was never poised to supplant urban capitalism. As I show more directly in the next chapter, freegans' prefigurative politics had its limits, not least of which being that the new society was being built with the cast-offs of the old one. Yet once we look beyond the obvious flaws, there's something deeper afoot.

Freegan practices were essentially an experimental play on the idea of "nature" and the values surrounding it. In Western countries, we are prone to think of nature as something "primordial, autonomous, and mechanistic,"⁶³ an immutable thing that exists "out there."⁶⁴ At least in one sense, by this definition waste is eminently natural: producing one form of "waste" is a biological certainty for anyone who is alive, after all, and thermodynamically, some emission of "waste" heat is an inevitable part of the transformation of matter.⁶⁵ But under neo-liberal capitalism, waste has been naturalized to an even greater extent. It's not just that creating waste seems so normal, so natural—who thinks twice about throwing out a candy wrapper?—that it fades into the background of our lives. It's also that when we are confronted with waste, we assume it's just a natural cost of doing business. During my research, I've been assured—*assured*, mind you—that supermarkets *absolutely* would not waste anything unless they really had to. This is, of course, the power of the fetish of waste at work: the notion that markets are optimally efficient, so if they do produce waste, it must be unavoidable and therefore "natural" or a product of *unnatural* state-induced distortions in the market.

⁶³ Goldman and Schurman (2000:564).

⁶⁴ Cronon (1996:34).

⁶⁵ Bisson and Proops (2002) show how "waste" in the form of excess energy is necessary to any mode of production. This is a fancy way of saying that all societies produce waste. This observation is as obvious as it is unenlightening.

Sociologists are fond of saying that things are a “social construct,” and environmental sociology’s discussions of “nature” are no exception.⁶⁶ Our ideas of what constitutes “nature”—or even our beliefs as to whether there is even such a thing as “nature” at all⁶⁷—depend more on culture and context than material reality.⁶⁸ What freegans expose is a variation on this point: that “waste” is not an inherent, natural quality of things, but a product of particular social arrangements.⁶⁹

Thus far, I’ve presented a fairly stark division between a capitalistic valuation of things based on exchange value—which leads to otherwise serviceable commodities being discarded as waste—and a freegan valuation of things based on use value—by which those very same objects do not appear to be waste at all. Under capitalism, being designated as “waste” is intended to mark the termination of the “social lives of things.”⁷⁰ It is not a natural death, however. As freegans show, through the labor that goes into sewing skill-shares, bike repair workshops, or Really Really Free Markets, the value of ex-commodities can be recovered and re-circulated.⁷¹

The logical corollary of the idea that waste is not “natural” is that, under different social arrangements, there might not be so much waste. But freeganism, perhaps inadvertently, demonstrates that reducing waste is more complicated than saying we should recognize the use value of the things we currently throw out. For one thing, ex-commodification creates *positive*

⁶⁶ For discussions of the social construction of nature, see (Bell 1994; Burningham and Cooper 1999; Fine 1998; Freudenburg, Frickel, and Gramling 1995; Greider and Garkovich 1994).

⁶⁷ Anthropologists have encountered many societies for which a Western division between “people” and “nature” is utterly incoherent (Blaser 2009; Descola 1996; Ingold 2000).

⁶⁸ (Fourcade 2011; Thevenot and Moody 2000).

⁶⁹ As O’Brien (2012:199) observes, “It is the circumstances, not the material itself, that determine whether or not said material is to be treated as waste.”

⁷⁰ Appadurai (1986).

⁷¹ This discussion draws on the work on the mutability of the designation of waste developed by (Hetherington 2004; Lepawsky and Billah 2011; Reno 2009; Thompson 1979).

value in the form of profits along the food chain, an important process that is usually rendered invisible.⁷² But when we see past the fetish of waste, we learn that ex-commodification also creates other kinds of value that most of us would be more reticent to relinquish than just filthy lucre. Convenience, abundance, choice, hygiene are all seemingly positive elements of our food system, yet all also dependent on ex-commodification through constant culling, over-ordering by stores, stringent aesthetic standards, and long supply chains. We could, of course, rearrange our food system and decide that we care more about carbon emissions than having asparagus flown in from Peru during the winter; more about how potatoes taste than their shape and appearance; more about cutting down on excess than on having every imaginable flavor of bagel available to us at the bakery's closing time. We could, but it's more complicated than just saying that we need to "value" our food more.

Ironically, even as freegans deconstructed the "naturalness" of waste and challenged the "arbitrary cultural meanings that support a system that allows useable food to be discarded,"⁷³ they were re-constructing "nature" in another way. Commenting, reflexively, on his own shifting ideas of nature, Zaac observed, "We're not just reusing nature, but thinking about how we define it. We're tearing the whole idea of nature apart and putting it back together, in a way that has more validity."

Radical as the statements of "anarcho-primitivists" like Adam, Zaac, or Jason might seem, though, they were drawing on deeply embedded codes in American culture that celebrate living "naturally."⁷⁴ For popular intellectuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson or early

⁷² This notion that producing waste is crucial for the creation of value is inspired by (Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Giles 2013; Gille 2010)

⁷³ (Coyne 2009:10).

⁷⁴ See Nash (1973).

conservationists like John Muir, though, the city was the moral antithesis of the wild nature they celebrated.⁷⁵ And, to an extent, the freegans agreed. The city, Sasha told me, could be “incredibly destructive” because its residents were separated from the natural spaces in which humans could flourish. Zaac speculated that “rates of depression are so high in America because we’re in a city, and we aren’t in some heavily forested area being spontaneous and finding wild asparagus.”

Annabelle described how the “un-naturalness” of the city affected her emotionally: “It’s just all cement and flashing lights. It can feel so empty. Sometimes I need to just go to the park and watch some ducks.” These freegans gave voice to the classic sociological proposition that “Nowhere has mankind been further removed from organic nature than under the conditions of life characteristic of great cities.”⁷⁶

Of course, “nature” is not completely absent in the city. There are “accidental pockets of nature”⁷⁷ all around: weeds growing up through cracks in the sidewalk, trees in an abandoned lot, birds roosting in skyscrapers.⁷⁸ On wild food foraging tours or in their work in community gardens, freegans tap into these more obvious natural spaces of the city. But they also bring their lives into line with their picture of nature in less overt ways, every time they share a find from a windfall “urban foraging” expedition, repair a pair of pants rather than buy a new one, or eat an over-the-hill apple most of us would throw out. Quinn eloquently summarized the almost subconscious ways that freegans were re-enchanting the urban landscape:

In the city, the earth is a park, a tree, or a bug. Maybe it’s noises or creepy things or shadows. That’s nature to me. With freeganism, you let things happen organically.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the moralization of the rural and demonization of the urban in American place narratives, see Hummon (1990).

⁷⁶ (Wirth 1938:2).

⁷⁷ Gandy (2006:63).

⁷⁸ See (Čapek 2010; Jerolmack 2013; Kaplan 1983).

Everyone is part of the equation. People are like nature and there are all sorts of varieties and uniquenesses in any situation. It ends up being just, sort of, magic.

Odd as it may seem, freegans both de-constructed the naturalness of wasted ex-commodities in their public critiques of capitalism and re-constructed the city as natural using those very same ex-commodities.⁷⁹ In a sense, even as freegans saw themselves as in open revolt against urban capitalism, their prefigurative project involved treating the city as an ecosystem within whose natural limits they sought to stay.

If the freegan vision for a future utopia enacted through everyday practices of recovering, re-valuing, and sharing objects seems simplistic, that's the point. Most freegans probably would roll their eyes at Adam's insistence, during one reading group, that human's should only consume what they're "supposed to" which, in his eyes, included "food, food, water, food, maybe some medical plants, and food." But as Leia once remarked during a freegan feast held amidst the 2008 financial crisis:

I heard people on CNN talking about how complicated banking systems are, how the public can never understand what policies we need. But economies shouldn't be that way. Economies should be something that everybody involved can have direct understanding and connection of. If it's too complicated, that means there's something wrong.

The prefigurative politics of freeganism hinged on the idea that if only we got the basic values right, and implemented them in our daily lives, the rest would fall into place. The remainder of this book looks at the limits of that vision.

⁷⁹ They thus might be described as "urban alchemists" who "detach the elementary molecules of the quotidian urban world and reconnect them" (Wynn 2010:160).

III: RECLAIMING THE EX-COMMODITY, RE-SPINNING THE FETISH: THE DECLINE OF FREEGANISM

6. Boundaries, Limits, and Ambiguities: The Paradoxes of Freeganism

Marion is one of only two informants I interviewed who asked that I use a pseudonym for her. I'll leave out a physical description as well, although she has figured in enough media accounts of freegan.info that she's not hard to track down. (As she noted: "I usually avoid the media, but if something happens that is totally idiotic, I feel compelled to speak.") Generally, though, she keeps a low profile, despite having attended the majority of freegan.info trash tours and feasts I've been to in the last five years. Her accumulated observations of the group, as someone who was distant from decision-making but attentive to freegan.info's internal dynamics, offered a unique perspective, and after lengthy negotiations, she acquiesced to an interview.

Some elements of Marion's story sound familiar. She told me she is "well-educated" and "grew up in suburban comfort and affluence." Her family life, she went on to tell me, gave her "full training in shopping skills—I was like people who study the Talmud for years and walk out of the room having never seen the light of day, except with the mall." She said she was involved with a handful of environmental and animal welfare causes when she was younger, but insisted that it was "nothing particularly radical."

In stark *contrast* to most of my other interviewees, Marion repeatedly avowed to me that she was "diving for her life"—that is, out of necessity. A few years ago, in a state of growing deprivation, the origins of which she would not explain, she began to recover wasted goods:

I just noticed that when I went to throw things away [in my apartment building], there were perfectly usable items peeking over the top of the garbage. I don't know. It might

have started when I was throwing away recyclables and one was right next to the other, and the thought crossed my mind that there were people who collected recyclable bottles to collect the deposit...And I was like, ‘This is an effortless resource, right here.’

She first heard about freeganism, she said, when a “free rag newspaper” delivered to her building had a cover story with a picture of Adam, describing “crazy people who eat out of the trash.” As she elaborated, “During wars, people have to align themselves with things that under ordinary circumstances they would have nothing to do with in order to preserve themselves. It [freeganism] was like that for me.” She attended her first trash tour and, later, lived for a period with Janet.

Politics occasionally crept into our conversations. At one trash tour after our interview, she came up to me and said, “I’ve been thinking about your book. You should talk about the connection between freeganism and bulimia—that we as a society consume too much, and so we have to purge ourselves through waste.” In the end, though, Marion was not one to go out of her way to push her political beliefs on others. When I asked her to define freeganism, she spoke only of practice, not ideology: “I consider myself one [a freegan] because I do these activities on my own, I gather the best part of my food, I’m pretty loose and flexible in terms of my fearlessness in salvaging. I’m not insane, but I’ll go outside the box, let’s say.”

Motivations aside, Marion is a skilled forager: she’s an invaluable part of any “trash trailblaze” in an unfamiliar neighborhood, and often performs a great deal of “advance work” before tours by going to stores and checking which items will soon expire. “It’s better to reduce it to a science, rather than leaving it up to chance,” she explained. Unlike some other freegans, though, she was remarkably candid about some of the limitations to dumpster diving. As to hygiene, she confessed:

I've always been fairly adventurous in terms of taking things out of a bag of slime and eventually eating it. This has not always been good: I want to emphasize that. Despite what everyone tells you that 'No problem will ever arise from this', that's not true... Every once in a while, it's like, 'Maybe there's some correlation between my [poor] health and the fact that I eat garbage all the time.'

Dumpster diving was a year-round activity, she noted, but "In the summer it's complicated, because you do have to make a judgment about what's fermented already." In short, while eating from the trash might have been the "least heinous" of her options, it was still pretty heinous.

Marion brought a critical eye to not just the practices of freeganism, but to the internal dynamics of freegan.info. When I asked her, "So is there something everyone in freegan.info shares?" she replied, "I doubt it." She went on to characterize what she perceived as the two main currents within the organization:

There are the people who are willing to live in misery and filth because they think it enhances or promotes their ability to change the way the world thinks or behaves. For a lot of them, their agenda is to 'scam the system', because they're kids and they think they're entitled to this or that thing.

This group—in some ways, reflective of freegan.info's anarchist origins (although "founders" like Adam and Wendy, as we'll see later, we're not particularly enthralled with the idea of "scamming the system")—was juxtaposed against another, represented by the likes of Janet or Madeline:

Then there are people who have not totally lost their minds and are not going to do that for 'the cause'. Some of the most vocal and adamant people are those with total safety

nets. I don't really see them stepping outside of capitalism because it would be difficult, and they don't want that discomfort. You could say they overlap into some hypocrisy. She added, though, that *both* groups came from positions of privilege, and were overwhelmingly white. She noted some of the barriers people who didn't fall into those categories faced with respect to freeganism:

I have some friends from the third world. They see desperation before them on a constant basis, even though they don't live in that country anymore. If you started out really compromised, then this [freeganism] is very offensive. This is just totally, totally obscene, revolting, [and] unacceptable.

Even for her, the stigma attached to meeting her needs from garbage could be overwhelming. "It's reasonably stressful to do this alone. I'm aware that I might be seen by people who go home and say, 'Guess what I saw today?'"

I asked her if she thought the group had an impact during her five years of observations, and she laughed: "In the media group, they think they're spinning this in the political cause sense." But, she added, "When people see a story about us, I think people come away thinking 'I just saw people eating garbage.' You can't put a political message to that visual." She did attribute the media for inspiring more and more people to come up to her during her dives and ask her if she's a freegan. "They just think it means dumpster diving, though," she added.

There was one change she could point to which was connected to freegan.info's actions, however. By 2012, stores were taking steps to guard their garbage. As she observed:

I've seen changes in specific stores, and some of these changes I attribute directly to freegan.info bringing tons of new people. The D'Agostino [in Murray Hill] used to be pretty much one-stop shopping. I would go there with a couple of people, and they would

look out the windows and see what we were doing. I remember a specific incident where it was a freegan trash tour, and the manager just flipped out. He came out and he was ranting and raving about pouring bleach on the food—and that didn't actually happen because of course he'd have a severe liability problem there—but shortly thereafter, they refused to put it out at all.

The response, to her, was not particularly surprising: “If you're the owner, how do you explain that people are going through the trash and getting five-hundred pounds of food while customers are still coming in and out of the store?” She added: “I think maybe ‘common sense’ is a skill we [freegans] should develop. This, by definition, needs to be an activity in which one does not bring much attention to what one is doing.”

Marion paints a darker portrait of freegan.info's activities and participants than I would. Nonetheless, she raised nearly all of the issues with which the remainder of this book deals: the limits and contradictions of freegans' politics of waste (this chapter) and the backlash it provoked (the next). Within the space of two hours, she had sketched out a framework for making sense of the decline of freeganism, articulating the weaknesses of prefigurative politics, the barriers to the appeal of a waste-based critique of capitalism, and the processes by which ex-commodities were ultimately reclaimed and the fetish re-spun.

The Limits of “Dropping Out”

This section takes up where Chapter 3 left off: with the process of becoming freegan. The *Why Freegan?* pamphlet defined freegans as people engaged in a “total boycott” of capitalism, and the same rhetoric about “dropping out” circulated within freegan.info. But what did becoming freegan actually mean in practice?

On one hand, most freegans did get the vast majority of their *food* without purchasing it. Madeline told me that she acquired 95% of her food through scavenging, gardening, and foraging, and bought only cooking oil. Wendy said that she purchased only what she saw as the “bare necessities” of a vegan diet—“flax seed and nutritional yeast”—and dumpster-dived the rest. At one “Freegan 101” held in an atrium at Columbia University, a participant asked Janet, “Is it possible to get *all* your food from the garbage?” to which she replied, “I don’t get *all* of my food from the garbage, but I know I’m able to. Every once and a while, I’ll buy soy milk or something like that, and then the freegan gods will punish me and the next time I’m out, I’ll find a whole crate of it.” Others, like Adam and Jonathan, insisted that they never bought food under any circumstances.¹

Housing, on the other hand, was more challenging. On paper, freegans have a clear strategy for acquiring housing without purchasing (or renting) commodified space: squatting. Yet there are very real barriers to squatting in New York City. Although the city had a vibrant squatters’ movement in the 1980s, under the Giuliani administration the city adopted a “stern...anti-squatter policy”² that contrasts sharply with the relative leniency towards squatters in European cities like Barcelona or Berlin.³ While, according to Graeber, an “archipelago”⁴ of

¹ Most freegans occasionally bought food, and were relatively apologetic about it, given that—as I have argued—they were more concerned with making a political point than washing their hands of all exploitation. As Jordan articulated to me in an e-mail, “Do I feel like buying a bag of black beans or a jug of soy milk from the corner grocery store is a relevant contradiction in my life? Absolutely not. That’s penny-pinching compared to the other contradictions. If everyone ate the way I did, we’d still have capitalism dead some time next week, not because I’m perfect, but because most people shop awfully and it’s a fragile system. Being a perfectionist about just food acquisition is a way to narrow one’s focus and rid one’s self of a responsibility-guilt one probably ought to have. Not my thing.”

² (Smith 1996:216).

³ Upon his return from his “squat tour” of Barcelona, for example, Sasha told me that police there would check the papers of new squatters and then leave them be. At least in some places,

activist spaces—some of them squatted—emerged in New York 2001 in the wake of the anti-globalization movement’s mass demonstrations, they were nowhere to be found by the time my research started.

Despite the inauspicious conditions, some freegans did experiment with occupying unused property in New York. Christian told me that he managed to go rent-free for a few months by sneaking into apartment building utility rooms. But when he attempted to create a more permanent squat by opening up an abandoned building with bolt cutters, he was caught and spent the night in jail for trespassing. Sasha, for his part, told me that he had squatted “now and again,” but admitted that “the last squat I was in was raided and all our stuff got thrown out.” During one trash tour, Jason pulled Zaac and me aside and asked if we wanted to try squatting an abandoned building he had found. “Are you planning to live there?” Zaac asked. “No,” Jason replied, “I have an apartment... But I’d try it for a few days.”

Some freegans were more successful in finding free space, but their stories are exceptions that confirm the rule: that squatting in New York is, as Quinn put it, “unsafe and unstable.” I first met Jonathan when a fellow researcher told me I needed to meet a “really hardcore freegan” who was squatting in the Lower East Side. She buzzed me into a high-end, well-maintained building. As we walked up a few floors, she explained that the current occupants had gained access to the building from someone they met at Occupy Wall Street, who opened up his apartment to dozens of activists when the movement’s encampment was shut down. The activist left, but Jonathan and two of his friends stayed—albeit without the rent payments. When I walked in, Jonathan

though, this may be changing: Britain, for example, has instituted harsh new bans on squatting and imprisoned some illegal occupants (Hooper 2012).

⁴ (2009:266).

gave me a quick tour: the three-bedroom apartment had fresh paint, hardwood floors, stainless steel appliances (“Check it out: washer and dryer!”), and an array of dumpstered furniture.

Because they had managed to stay in the apartment for a month and established residency, the trio were sure that the process to remove them would be long and drawn out. Settling in, they had even started to pay for electricity and water. One of Jonathan’s roommates—a thin, agitated late-teen who had come to New York from San Diego to be part of OWS—proudly told me: “Everyone is always talking about ‘eating the rich’. We’re the ones actually doing it. We’re taking money from the corporation that owns this building. I don’t feel bad about it.” Nevertheless, “the rich” were not willing to stand idly by and be eaten: the trio had received an eviction notice and gone to civil court the week before, and they were now slated to be kicked out by the end of June.

When I spoke to Jonathan later that year, he had moved on to a squat in an abandoned house in a more remote borough. The project of making the structure habitable, Jonathan noted, was taking most of his time: “Squatting isn’t just living in a place where you don’t pay rent. Squatting is a project in itself. It’s not for someone who has a job and just wants to come here and sleep and go back to work.” He envisioned the building becoming a community center with a library, tool lending services, free event space, and “free store” of dumpstered goods. But the “community” itself was skeptical about his project: one neighbor, he told me, had come over and screamed, “I’ve worked my entire life to buy a house, and you’re just living in one for free. It’s immoral.” It is true that amidst the economic crisis, low-income people around the U.S.,

supported by activist organizations, are squatting in foreclosed homes.⁵ But when I asked Jonathan if the movement was taking off in New York, he said, in a word, “No.”

There have been other, more collective attempts to take freegan principles and apply them to housing. In 2008, Quinn and Wendy pushed the idea of creating a freegan community forward when they founded “Surrealestate” in a post-industrial neighborhood of Brooklyn. With over fifty occupants, Surrealestate—which hosted the freegan.info office downstairs—operated in a manner consistent with key elements of freeganism. Decisions about the use of the space were made based on consensus, Quinn reported that most of the food eaten there was dumpstered,⁶ and tenants were expected to volunteer several hours a week to activist projects.

Yet the housing project was very *un-freegan* in at least one sense: renting a communal loft in Surrealestate, according to Quinn, cost between three and four hundred dollars a month. As Quinn admitted, “Anarchist spaces are either bankrolled by someone or they have to take a more capitalist approach.” Lacking a benefactor, Surrealestate had no choice but to charge rent and evict delinquent tenants. Despite the significant compromises that Quinn and others had to make in order to raise each month’s rent—turning parties initially intended as fundraisers for activist groups into benefits for Surrealestate itself—the space struggled with repeated attempted evictions from the city. More than that, though, the project suffered from an inability to find people committed to its communal ideals. As Jason, who lived a year in Surrealestate, told me:

Sure, there was FNB, bike-building, every kind of building going on, there was just a lot of general ferment, people having conversations. But it was always marked by this kind

⁵ Leland (2009). It’s worth noting that in many of these areas, neighbors welcomed squatters, as they contributed to the maintenance of the homes and thus kept property values up (see, also, Parson 2010 Ch.5).

⁶ Adam, on the other hand, claimed that most people in Surrealestate were using food stamps to get food, and dumpstering only occasionally.

of, at the same time as it's a bunch of anarchists, it's also a bunch of young kids who don't know what they think about anything yet, and are just poor and want to do something. And they might have never encountered anything coming close to a radical political point of view before—ever. And some of them left without ever knowing what that means.

When Marion referenced the “misery and filth” of some freegans, she was definitely referring to Surrealestate, where a mixture of conflict and freeriding led to a steady physical deterioration.

Attempting to get more like-minded people to join him, Quinn once advertised over the freegan e-mail list that he was renting out “freegan” rooms in Surrealestate. Adam expressed outrage. To him, a place that required rent could not call itself “freegan,” and he continued to “block” any freegan.info events from taking place there.⁷ The debate became even more divisive when Adam declared that Surrealestate was a form of first-wave gentrification. Based on my own observations, Adam seemed to have a point: most of the residents of Surrealestate were white and educated, in a neighborhood traditionally populated by working-class African Americans. Jason and Quinn moved out in 2011 and Wendy told me later that year that Surrealestate could no longer call itself an “activist”—much less “freegan”—space.

As a result, even though in Quinn's words “true freegans don't pay rent,” the reality was that nearly all of them did. Some had eliminated rent payments, but only by buying a home outright, as Madeline and Janet had. In December 2011, I attended a “freegan feast” in Madeline's apartment in Brooklyn, which she bought shortly after quitting her job. Her neighborhood was modest, but her building had a doorman and her apartment had a spacious

⁷ Of course, Adam himself was living in the Surrealestate basement, with his parents paying the rent. Quinn lovingly called him “the basement troll,” adding, “He knows, you can quote me on that.”

living room, filled with slightly tattered but still high-quality couches, chairs, and cabinets. She avowed, “I got a lot of the furniture right off the street,” but admitted that she bought the bookshelf off of Craigslist, before quickly adding that, “Someone was going to get rid of it, and I’m finding a use for it.” She also pointed to her holiday decorations—trees, lights, and poinsettia flowers—and proudly told me that she found all of them in the garbage. Our discussion about which items were and were not purchased, though, never came around to the more obvious incongruity: that we were holding a freegan event in an bought-and-paid-for apartment.

This excursus into freegans’ struggles to find space highlights a broader point about the politics of waste: namely, that just because something is being “wasted” doesn’t mean people have access to it. Despite a large homeless population and a near universally-acknowledged lack of affordable housing, New York City in 2008 had over 60,000 vacant rental units.⁸ Some of these units, according to one report, were deliberately being withheld from the market to raise prices, particularly in gentrifying neighborhoods where speculators anticipated that rents would rise.⁹ Yet while in this respect vacant housing is “ex-commodified”—it *could* be used by someone, but for financial reasons *isn’t*—it is *not* ex-commodified in the same sense as food in a dumpster, whose owners have relinquished any future claim to it.¹⁰

This is not to say that if squatting were easier, freegans would actually do it: Marion certainly thought that many in the group would never go that far. But the question is an academic

⁸ Lee (2011:351).

⁹ Right to the City (2010).

¹⁰ The same point could be made of abandoned lots. Although 9% of New York City’s land area is classified as “vacant” most of these parcels are privately owned and monitored (Kremer, Hamstead, and McPhearson 2013). Under Mayor Giuliani, the city attempted to auction off 115 of the city’s 600 community gardens to the highest bidder—who, invariably, were not the gardeners themselves—bulldozing gardens run by people of color which the city had once welcomed as a defense against urban blight (see, e.g., Carlsson 2008:Ch.5; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004; Schmelzkopf 1995).

one. Relative to Oakland, where many Food Not Bombs activists had taken advantage of the city's surfeit of abandoned buildings and over-stretched police force to eliminate rent payments, New York's extremely high density and zero-tolerance law enforcement made it an unfavorable terrain. Those like Jonathan who *did* squat did so at the expense of making it the all-consuming locus of their political activities.

Working Through Contradictions

In keeping with a totalizing view of freeganism as a way of “dropping out” of capitalism, the freegan.info website is replete with statements about the destructiveness of wage-labor and conventional employment. Indeed, the freegan.info home page insists that all workers—not just employers, owners, or managers—are morally culpable for the abuses of a capitalist system.¹¹ At least in its idealized form, freeganism provides an escape route from these nets of culpability, because—through recovering waste—“Freegans are able to greatly reduce or altogether eliminate the need to constantly be employed.” As Sasha told me:

For an activist, for someone who is working against capital, the question, ‘What do you do for money’ becomes a really funny thing. What do I do for money? As in what do I do to get money? Or what do I do to help the inflationary state bank get money out of my dollars? The answer is ‘nothing’. I don’t want to do anything for money, I don’t like

¹¹ <http://freegan.info/>. As Adam wrote in one essay, “Once we realize that it’s not a few bad products or a few egregious companies responsible for the social and ecological abuses in our world, but rather the entire system we are working in, we begin to realize that, as workers, we are cogs in a machine of violence, death, exploitation, and destruction. Is the retail clerk who rings up a cut of veal any less responsible for the cruelty of factory farming than the farm worker? What about the ad designer who finds ways to make the product palatable? How about the accountant who does the grocery books and allows it to stay in business? Or the worker in the factory that manufactures refrigerator cases? And, of course, the high level managers of the corporations bear the greatest responsibility of all, for they make the decisions which causes the destruction and waste. You don’t have to own stock in a corporation or own a factory or chemical plant to be held to blame.”

money. And so when you don't believe in the capitalist system it's nearly impossible to get a job.

For him, in an economy founded on constant ramping up of production and consumption, idleness was a form of resistance that prefigured a society with a paucity of physical goods but a surfeit of leisure.

Yet my research suggests that voluntary unemployment was at best a transitory phase that eventually ran up against the hard realities of urban life. Even Sasha confessed, "It's way too idealistic to expect that you will never need money so long as you have to pay rent," and as a consequence, despite a stint of unemployment in the summer of 2008, work remained for him an "unpleasant reality." Similarly, Jason avowed, "Money is the fuel for global destruction, so any job for money *is* the problem," but he continued to work as a documentary film editor. Jason expressed his complex sentiments towards his situation in one "waving the banana" speech, noting, "It depends on what kind of work people are doing. Some things are actively harmful, actually destroying the planet. Even investing in the stock market, you're buying into the slipping away of everything in the world." Yet, he continued, "We can't get money out of our lives yet, and it'd actually be pretty foolish to try to do that."

In some cases, freegan.info activists found paid employment that they saw as consistent with freegan objectives. Jonathan, for example, made ends meet through freelance design for activist newsletters, while Sasha eventually got a job at a left-wing environmental press. Janet and Evie were unabashed about their work as a teacher at a public high school and speech pathologist at a public hospital, respectively. Others, however, lived with obvious tension between their employment and values. As Cindy confided in me:

For three days a week, I teach as an environmental arts instructor in after-school programs. It's work I would be doing whether or not I'm being paid for it. But I also do two days a week of product packaging design. That's an absurd contradiction. I do periods of wage-slavery type stuff, so the rest of the time I can do something else.

She then offered some rationalizations, but it was evident she knew they were strained: "I guess someone else would be doing it if I weren't. At least if I'm doing it, I can control the ethical dimensions of it to an extent, like making sure they don't use any animal products." However they came to justify it, the key take-away is that virtually everyone in freegan.info was engaging in paid labor.

So were *any* freegans living up to the supposed ideal of a complete withdrawal from capitalism? Certainly, Adam appeared to come close, insofar as he spent very little, never bought food or clothes, and was unemployed. But even Adam readily admitted that his lifestyle was not an autonomous one: he depended on external support from his parents, who paid the rent for the freegan office where he slept and covered his medical bills.

Some, however, seemed to come closer to what the freegan.info and *Why Freegan?* manifesto presented as the "total boycott." When I spoke to Gio, a self-described "pacifist Christian anarchist freegan," he was trading housework for a tiny room on the Upper West Side. When I asked him if he bought anything, he replied, after a long pause, "not really." What limited funds Gio did spend he got from busking on the subways, which, as he explained, was "not what some people pejoratively refer to as 'wage slavery'" because "I'm not selling my time or even my energy and my effort. It's just, 'I'm here, I'm here freely, but if someone wants to contribute to my livelihood, they can put it in my little jar.'"

After an hour of interviewing, I began to think I had at last found someone who seemed to live up to freegan archetype across all the different facets of his life. When I asked him whether he had time to keep talking, though, he did something I did not expect: he took an iPhone out of his pocket. “I guess we all have contradictions,” I remarked, to which he replied, “Yes, thank you. That’s what I’ve always been trying to say. Yes, I own an iPhone.”¹² As our interview came to a close, Gio confessed that his barter-for-space living arrangement was not working out, and so he needed to find a regular job to pay his share of the rent for the communal apartment he was moving into.

In short, the freegan movement—at least as represented by freegan.info—appeared riddled with inconsistencies. Its manifestos abounded with commitments to escaping from capitalism, but all of its practitioners lived in ways that were profoundly imbricated with the capitalist system. This is not to deny the ingenuity that freegans deployed every day to limit their participation in the mainstream economy. I saw this creativity when the group came together to research herbal remedies for Tate’s pink eye, or through Janet’s frequent distributions of toilet paper and shampoo thrown out by hotels. Nevertheless, many freegans would likely empathize with Evie, who told me, “I’m freegan in a lot of little things in my life, but at the end of the day, I have a job and a home so I’m paying taxes and funding a couple of enormous wars and pretty much everything that goes bad in the world.” Such a finding is clearly a disappointment to many of those who have reported on freegans in the past. One journalist describes the anti-climactic

¹² Although, he noted, his sister was paying his phone bill.

realization that, during her “search for the freegan ideal,” she discovered that the freegans “had for the most part gone to school, had jobs, paid rent”¹³—for her, a clear sign of hypocrisy.

There are two more nuanced points to be made about the evident disparity between freegan rhetoric and practice. The first I already articulated in the previous section: just because, under capitalism, everything gets “wasted” doesn’t mean that freegans can find everything they need in a dumpster. Food is, in some ways, unique in its perishability. Excess food cannot just be hoarded, but has to be disposed of somehow. The more distant the commodity is from food, though, the fuzzier the notion of “waste” gets. Certainly, other low-price commodities, from clothes to party supplies, get pitched out with regularity. High-value goods like cars or apartments may be “ex-commodified” in the sense of going unused, though, but their owners are nonetheless reluctant to part with them. And once we get to services, all bets are off. We could, of course, argue that lots of medical spending is “wasteful,” but it’s hard to dumpster dive the gratuitous tests doctors perform on Medicare patients to bilk the government and give them to the uninsured. No one has ever found a cell-phone activation plan in the garbage, but all the freegans, other than Cindy and Adam, had phones.

Freegans, of course, are not oblivious to these contradictions. Indeed, my second point is that there is an openly-acknowledged tension between the prefigurative project of building *alternatives* to capitalism and the simultaneous desire to *challenge* capitalism. In truth, for all their rhetoric about “dropping out” and a “total boycott,” most freegans leaned towards the latter strategy. As numerous interviewees observed, if they were single-mindedly concerned with not

¹³ (Darrell 2009:32). More (2011) makes a similar observation of the freegans she met in Indiana, all of whom worked for wages and paid rent.

participating in capitalism, they would move to an autonomous rural commune. Jason explained why, despite having the resources to do that, he chose not to:

Setting up a commune out in the country would be good for me, but I don't know how that would be for the overall resistance. I definitely want to get out of the city eventually... [but] there's a lot of work that needs to be done in all different places...and lots of it needs to happen here, and not in the country. Since I'm here, I should do the work that needs to be done here.

In short, freegans justified what some saw as hypocrisy by claiming that they were more concerned with collective efficacy than individual lifestyle perfection—a point consistent with the motivations that drove them to become freegans in the first place.

In short, freegan.info participants were not “dropping out” because, in their eyes, “dropping out” was not the point of freeganism. Freegan.info activists readily admitted that there were contradictions between their ideals and their daily lives: at the same time, however, they negated the idea that overcoming these contradictions was the point of freeganism. “I’m not attached to being perfect...I’m about changing in a good direction rather than being perfect,” one explained. Leia was particularly dismissive of people who sought to perfect their lifestyles by leaving the city: “It’s selfish to say ‘Fuck everybody, I just want to live in a cave.’ There’s so much work that needs to be done in this world.” There *are* people in modern America like Daniel Suelo, “The Man Who Quit Money,” who really *do* live in caves and really *don’t* spend anything.¹⁴ But while these people offer a model from which freegans draw inspiration and feel solidarity, the reality is that most freegans are more concerned with having an impact than living

¹⁴ Sundeen (2012). Keith McHenry told me that, in all his travels, “Honestly, I’ve only met 10-15 people total—anywhere—who consciously never buy anything and see themselves as freegans.”

blameless lives. This doesn't stop critics from jumping on the vast gulf between the way freegans talk and the way they live, though.

Isolation and Alienation

Freegans' decision to "stay and fight" in the city had costs not just for the consistency of their personal practices, but also for their psychological health and interpersonal relationships. For freegans, even the most basic dimensions of urban life were ethically problematic. In a society where many social situations involve buying something like a beer or a movie ticket, being a freegan could be profoundly isolating. As Janet told me, "You can sit in a room of five or ten people, and they're talking about bargains and sales and 'Where'd you buy that?' and what the latest technology is, and you can really feel like you don't want to participate at all, or that you have to guard it [your freeganism]." Isolation came not just from consumptive choices but political beliefs. Jonathan elaborated how the ideology behind his freeganism fed into a feeling of alienation and disaffection from the people around him: "I always stand around in a room full of people and think, 'Oh my God, no one is an anti-capitalist here.' I feel so alone, I feel so out of place...It's so lonely. It's depressing as hell to live here [in New York]."

Becoming freegan did not just isolate the group's participants from the city's residents writ large, but from their friends and families. In our interview, Jason mentioned a conversation he had the previous night with a close friend from college:

He was talking about how he loves Obama but he thinks that it's not a good idea to raise taxes on the upper class because it's going to hurt small businesses, and he's a pretty wealthy person, and I was just like, 'Oh my god, let's just not even talk about this.' My old liberal democrat self would disagree with you, but my new radical self, I don't even

want to bother having this conversation. Where do I even begin? I don't just disagree with you, but even on top of that, I reject the whole argument in the first place.

Gio told me that every time he went home, his mother would embark on another attempt to convince him to follow a more “normal” life course: “She’ll tell me ‘You’re so smart. You have all these skills. You could get a job.’ And I’m at a loss for words because I don’t know how to comfort my Mom and stay true to my values and the way that I feel I have to live.” Although freegans didn’t want to participate in capitalism, that didn’t mean they wanted to disconnect from everyone else happily participating in capitalist society. Yet the two competing desires could not easily be reconciled.

Of course, the idea behind freegan feasts and other events was to build a sense of solidarity and community among the group’s participants. Many people remarked how monthly dinners or weekly trash tours could serve as re-affirmations of their commitments to cutting back on consumption or engaging in political action. Yet anyone reading between the lines of the previous chapter could see that the freegan “community” had its limits. Sewing skill shares or foraging tours were “temporary autonomous zones” where freegans could, for a moment, feel what it would be like to live in a post-capitalist society. But they were just that—temporary—and as I show in the next chapter, often riven with conflict. Freegans thus spent much of their time not with other freegans but with coworkers, roommates, and non-freegan friends.

Huge cities like New York concentrate diverse lifestyles and fringe viewpoints in a small area,¹⁵ and it is therefore possible that freegans could find “community” in any one of the city’s abundant subcultures. Yet many freegans *also* described feeling alienated from other non-freegan activists. Freegans critiqued other radical and anarchist movements for being insufficiently

¹⁵ See Fischer (1975).

committed to living out their principles and more focused on partying than achieving social change.¹⁶ Sasha was both witty and scathing when he told me that, “With most anarchist groups, everyone wears black and is, sort of, nothing. And as for squatters, half the time, the goal is to find a wasted space and get wasted.”

As a result, freegans often felt almost claustrophobic, as if the entire city was conspiring against them. This was evident in the group’s ongoing collective struggle to find a free, public place to meet. When I returned to the group in 2011, a significant portion of a planning meeting was taken up by trying to find a new location. As Madeline reported to me, a few weeks prior, an irate grocery store manager had threatened to call the police and evict the freegans from his store’s seating area (since, unsurprisingly, no one had bought anything).¹⁷ Madeline told me she was fearful that confrontations like this were preventing erstwhile activists from becoming involved in the group. This particular evening, we were sitting in a Starbucks (“Seating is for Customers Only”) inside a bookstore. When we sat down, we chose a table behind a column, but Madeline decided it was best to purchase a cup of coffee and display the receipt on the table. When Janet arrived, she started unloading various food items—some pre-made stir fry and leftover Halloween candy—while Madeline built a wall with discarded cups from the waste bin to obscure them.

Even activist spaces and social centers that freegans usually used to screen films or hold forums generally charged something for entrance. Recently, the group has met in public-private atriums: lobbies that private corporations are required to open to the public in exchange for tax-

¹⁶ See Fincham (2007).

¹⁷ The threats to non-paying users of commercial space are real: a recent New York Times article describes how the police have been called repeatedly on a group of elderly Korean men in Queens for lingering too long in a McDonald’s (Nir and Ham 2014).

breaks from the city. As their uncomfortable use of places created by precisely the capitalist system they opposed shows, the freegans have struggled with creating “spaces outside of capitalism.” The small frustrations of having nowhere to meet were emblematic of the broader decline of non-commodified, public space in America,¹⁸ a gradual erosion that became acutely visible when the Occupy movement was evicted from nominally public parks across America.¹⁹ The result is that freegans are pushed to take advantage of one of the few public spaces in the city that is still available: the sidewalk.

Freegans’ sense that they were doing something efficacious and meaningful, then, was always coupled with a frustration that the main currents of American society flowed strongly against them. During one December meeting in the back of one of the few grocery stores that the group had yet to be kicked out of, the song “Silent Night” began blaring. Janet interrupted the conversation to announce, “I really hate it this time of year, when I can’t even walk down my street without hearing Christmas music piped out into the street. It’s almost like a mandate to go out and buy stuff. I think it’s offensive.” At this point, Ron went to the front of the store, and returned to tell us that he had asked them to turn down the music, but that they told him “they can’t even control it. It *is* a mandate—they have to listen.” Cindy turned to me and joked, “Isn’t it funny that a song about the baby Jesus makes you want to buy stuff?” Although, in this moment, freegans could revel in their mutual disaffection, most of the time their anti-consumerist sentiments were lonely ones.

¹⁸ Cohen (2003); Eliasoph (1998); Mitchell (1995).

¹⁹ Occupy Wall Street also moved into a public-private atrium “provided” by Deutsche Bank after it was evicted from Zuccotti Park.

The Boundaries of a Freegan Appeal

Caveats aside, in Chapter 4, I suggested that *freegan.info*'s message proved surprisingly appealing. Whether drawn by the tangibility of direct action, the appeal to traditional values of non-wasting and thrift, or the practicality of free stuff, a steady stream of newcomers—around ten per night—came to *freegan.info* events during the course of my research. But who, exactly, was this “public” to which *freegan.info* was appealing? And who was excluded from it?

The group was relatively successful in attracting and engaging individuals from across the spectrum of age and gender. In sharp contrast to accounts of the youthful anarchist groups of the anti-globalization movement,²⁰ *freegan.info* attracted a fair share of older individuals: half my interviewees were over thirty, and one-fourth over forty. Commenting on the age range at one trash tour, one person involved in Manhattan Food Not Bombs noted, “Over there [at FNB], there’s no one over thirty.” Similarly, the “Grub” community meal—a dumpster-dived feast hosted by In Our Hearts—stubbornly drew only a younger set. Admittedly, saying that *freegan.info* had a wider age range than the other anarchist groups I interacted with sets an exceedingly low bar. But the fact that *freegan.info* exceeded that bar is still noteworthy.

Similar observations could be made with respect to gender. In my East Bay FNB comparison study, participants in direct action were so heavily skewed towards men that some joked that they were “man-archists.” A study of freegans in Australia similarly reports that freegans are “predominantly male.”²¹ Yet two-thirds of my interviewees self-identified as women, and trash tours’ audiences were often largely female. Some freegans speculated that the group drew larger numbers of women because it appealed to innate gender roles. Annabelle told

²⁰ (Graeber 2009:246).

²¹ (Edwards and Mercer 2007:282).

me that women make good dumpster divers because they are “evolutionarily predisposed to be more opportunistic” in terms of finding things for their families. “If you look at who collects material in our society, who takes care of the household, who does the shopping,” she added, “it’s always the women.” Whether or not we put stock in this essentialism, survey data make it clear that women are more concerned about waste, the environment, and animals than men.²² And it certainly helped the group that some of its prominent spokespeople were women like Janet, Cindy, and Madeline.

The class and socioeconomic backgrounds of freegan.info’s trash tour attendees are more difficult to assess, but as noted in Chapter 3, most core freegan.info activists came from comparative privilege. On the whole, freegans were reflective about the way social class facilitated their participation in freeganism and differentiated them from those who adopted “simple lifestyles” out of necessity. As one former freegan articulated:

The fact that I was choosing to live that lifestyle [freeganism] meant that I never really learned what it meant to have to. I recognize that my privilege was always there. I don’t want to pretend that I’ve experienced living minimally, because I’ve never had to really do it without a choice.

Cindy also pointed out how the stigma attached to dumpster diving was easier to ignore if one wasn’t facing other forms of censure from society:

Certainly people who have grown up with privilege, it’s a lot easier to break taboos and to be seen out digging through the trash for your food. That’s very basic... if you’re at the bottom of the economic heap it’s not as easy to say, ‘Oh yeah, I’m going to be voluntarily

²² For recycling, see (Barr 2007; Oates and McDonald 2006); for environmental activities (Hunter, Hatch, and Johnson 2004); for animal rights and vegetarianism (Greenbaum 1995; Jerolmack 2003; Kendall et al. 2006).

poor' because you're not voluntarily poor, you're *involuntarily* poor. Economic privilege is pretty specific to freegan stuff in that we're talking about voluntary poverty, and that is a pretty hot-button issue for people who are being forced into that kind of a situation.

As freegans recognized, the idea of recovering ex-commodities had a different meaning in communities that lacked the resources to purchase those commodities in the first place. Adam put it succinctly when he remarked, "For some people, the message 'Stop buying so much' is inane and offensive, since they can't even provide for their basic needs."

The basic daily routines of being a freegan, too, created barriers to participation that fell along class lines. Dumpster diving, bike repair, or community gardening were all time consuming. The scheduling of freegan.info events has always been built around the assumption that attendees would have a middle-class or professional work schedule. Even as the group was constantly making its members more informed about environmental and social issues, participation in freegan.info presumed a baseline knowledge and political vocabulary closely tied to a formal—usually college—education (or, at least a lot of free time spent reading critical theory). As other research has pointed out, the individualistic, horizontal, and prefigurative approach to politics taken by anarchist-influenced groups like freegan.info can seem profoundly off-putting and exclusionary to individuals accustomed to more hierarchical groups that deploy conventional tactics.²³

An over-representation of middle-class and upper-middle-class individuals is not a problem specific to freegan.info: indeed, similar criticisms have been leveled at Occupy, the anti-globalization movement, and Food Not Bombs. To its credit, freegan.info's central practices partly bridged the class divide by simultaneously seeking structural change *and* trying to address

²³ See Lichterman (1996).

the real, immediate needs of poor and lower class individuals. In a city with over one million food insecure individuals, trash tours provided at least some people with quality food.²⁴ Of course, rescuing discarded food or redeeming recyclable containers is already a widespread, but deeply stigmatized, survival strategy among the poor in the U.S., as I discuss in the next section. What freegan.info added to the equation was the legitimization and valorization of these practices, which some self-described low-income trash tour attendees told me they greatly appreciated.

The value of the practical skills taught by freegan.info became apparent in late 2008, as the economy went into free-fall. Just as New York City began to shed jobs at every step of the economic ladder, freegan.info's events were flooded with newcomers.²⁵ In a moment where, as a spokesman for the food recovery organization City Harvest told me, "the need [for food] is really growing," freegan.info provided strategies for meeting those needs that allowed individuals to maintain their autonomy from charity or government programs. As Cindy hopefully commented, "The current state of the economy makes all of this seem less idealistic and more like reality."

The role of race in the freegan movement, on the other hand, is more clearly problematic. At least in principle, freegans are deeply concerned about structural racism and oppression in American society. As one e-mail of group principles firmly stated:

Freegan.info is a non-hierarchical organization that strives to be respectful and anti-oppressive. We promote sustainability and challenge oppression and must reflect this in our practices. This means keeping the economic, environmental, and social impact of our events in mind. We see it as necessary to address power dynamics within our group and

²⁴ (Brannen 2010:3).

²⁵ Other interviewees from locations ranging from San Francisco to Athens likewise confirmed that the economic downturn had led to a surge in dumpster diving.

consider the impacts of our privileges (such as race, class, gender, sexuality, culture, age, ability, and species). We want to create a positive atmosphere that encourages and supports sustainable living, and we strive to meet people where they are and reject exclusion, judgment, and self-righteousness.

Similarly, when Sasha spoke about his “squat tour,” he claimed that in many of the communities he visited “anti-racism was a real focus point for the whole project.” At this point, one middle-aged African American woman in the audience stood up and challenged him: “If anti-racism is so important to freegans, how come everyone you’ve talked about is under thirty, no kids, and white? All these squatters sound like they have no one to take care of but themselves.”

Initially, Alex stayed away from the question of race, replying, “No, no, no. There was a kid who was being raised by a bisexual couple, both of them from Norway.”

“Okay,” the woman replied, “Still sound under thirty, white.”

“Well, some of them were not white they were, I guess, brown,” Sasha responded, adding, “As far as identifying as white, that’s something that a lot of people don’t like to do. There’s a lot of connotations of norms and things that you’re automatically thrown into if you’re identifying yourself as white...It wasn’t really an issue where ‘I identify as that color, I identify as this color.’ It’s about ‘I identify as this person.’”

The woman sat down, looking clearly dissatisfied.

As the anecdote suggests, freegans reacted to the frequent characterizations of their movement as overwhelmingly white with a mixture of denial and concern. Kelly Ernst, the anthropologist who studied freegan.info before I did, reports that, by 2007, some in freegan.info

were fretting that media coverage invariably depicted freegans who were white.²⁶ Yet this media portrayal was far from a misrepresentation: the core members of freegan.info *were* almost all white. Of my interviewees, only three were people of color.²⁷ When Leia queried the group if there was interest in starting a “Freegan Women’s Caucus,” the reply was enthusiastic. No one responded when she proposed a caucus for Freegans of Color.

All freegans are trespassing a social norm and face individual stigmatization when they go into the trash to find food. People of color, however, face an added burden: that their contact with waste reinforces a “globally ubiquitous racial construction”²⁸ of entire races as “polluted” or “diseased.” This helps explain why, as critics have pointed out, the organic and local food movements’ celebration of “getting your hands dirty”²⁹ in community gardens or farms (or, for freegans, dumpsters) is singularly unappealing to people of color who have long been forced to “get their hands dirty” to survive and/or produce food for white people. People of color suffer from symbolic and material associations with waste in other ways as well. Inner city ghettos, for their part, have been symbolically framed in public debate as “dumpsters for the poor.”³⁰ By associating themselves with waste, then, people of color risk reaffirming a longstanding conflation of “wasted” objects and spaces with “wasted” people and populations.³¹

²⁶ (2009).

²⁷ This is consistent with the findings of other studies on freegans (Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013; Edwards and Mercer 2007). Two people of color denied my request for interviews, which is itself revealing and cause for reflection.

²⁸ (Pellow 2007:98).

²⁹ (Guthman 2008:435).

³⁰ (Wacquant 2012:30).

³¹ As Dillon (2013:2) found in her interviews with people of color living near a toxic waste disposal site, “Many [had] an experience of being left to waste: exposed to the material form of waste...and left, more broadly, or neglected, by the state in ways that have manifested in the wasting of human lives.”

One night, on the subway after a trash tour, I had a conversation with Stacey, an African American woman in her late twenties who worked in alternative medicine. During the evening, I noticed that she stayed at the periphery of the group, and as far as I could tell, didn't gather any food. The idea of reducing waste, clearly, appealed to her; something about the *practice* of freeganism was, however, more off-putting. She told me she was worried the entire trash tour that one of her corporate clients was going to walk by, adding, "I've worked too damn hard to be seen digging through the trash." She then tentatively broached the issue of race, saying, "I think it's a lot easier for white people to do that. People almost expect you to be doing something like that [referencing my appearance]. When white people do it, everyone just assumes 'Oh, it's a project.'"³² To her, to be white and dumpster diving suggested a deliberate and adversarial action; to be black and dumpster diving was a marker of desperation.

I don't want to suggest for one second that "waste" is a peripheral issue for people of color. In the 1960s, Puerto Ricans in Spanish Harlem and African Americans in Bedford Stuyvesant protested against unequally provisioned municipal sanitation services by gathering uncollected garbage and dumping it on city hall.³³ In the 1980s, activists from black neighborhoods joined with Hasidic Jews in contesting the placement of a toxic incinerator at the

³² One black freegan, in a blog post entitled "Freegans of Color," similarly notes that "When I'm dumpster diving, I have a few more issues to deal with, as a Black male, than my white comrades. They aren't nearly as afraid of the police (or security), or threats of calling the police (or security), nor do they get harassed by law enforcement while diving to the degree that I do. I got harassed by security several times while diving on my own campus, until my white friends pop their heads out of the dumpsters. I'm also extremely embarrassed for people to see me diving, because I can tell that I'm not just me, I'm also a representation of Black people in general" (qtd. in Corman 2011:46).

³³ (Kelly 1973; Sze 2006).

Brooklyn Naval Yard.³⁴ As research on the “environmental justice” movement makes clear, people of color are at the forefront of the politics of waste in the United States.³⁵

Nevertheless, the *types* of waste confronted by the environmental justice movement and freegan.info are quite different. Although I have suggested that “ex-commodities” may be an important part of the municipal waste stream, municipal waste is itself only a small fraction of the material excess produced in the United States.³⁶ Much of the rest consists of industrial byproducts like mining tailings or ash, which analyses of “environmental racism” show are disproportionately likely to be dumped in lower class or minority communities.³⁷ Many people of color don’t need the “fetish of waste” exposed to them, since they are already living with waste and its harmful impacts on a quotidian basis. At the same time, industrial waste is not really something that activists could re-cover and re-use, as freegans celebrate doing.

Nevertheless, there are clear potential points of solidarity between environmental justice movements and freegans, given that both are deeply concerned with the production of waste under capitalism. In my time with freegan.info, though, such linkages were rarely drawn, in part because “race” was an infrequent topic of conversation. Ernst attempted to arrange a meeting on racial privilege in freegan.info, but no one aside from Adam attended.³⁸ In his words, the group never got beyond “having conversations about not having conversations on race.” I have no doubt that freegans are sincere when they list racial domination as of the social ills to which they are opposed. But to treat racism as just one of many forms of oppression—as many freegans

³⁴ (Gandy 2002).

³⁵ (Pellow 2004; Szasz 1994).

³⁶ See MacBride (2012:Ch.3) for an extension of the largely undocumented and invisible place of industrial byproducts in the overall waste stream.

³⁷ (Crowder and Downey 2010; Dillon 2013; Grant et al. 2010; Krieg 1998).

³⁸ (2009).

seem to—misses that American capitalism was built on the backs of people of color.³⁹ To make freegans' anti-capitalist critique of waste more broadly appealing would require bringing these alternative forms of waste to the forefront and finding forms of direct action to confront them.

Scavenging for Survival, Scavenging as a Statement

Although the previous section discusses cross-racial exchanges that largely *didn't* happen, there was one sort of interaction that *did* occur with regularity: encounters between freegan.info and the city's homeless population. During one tour, an apparently homeless black man walked up, carrying a few ragged bags and mumbling unintelligibly. Someone declared, "He's hungry," and the group leapt into action. Sasha started explaining some basic tips for dumpster diving. Jason filled up a bag with bagels for him. When the man himself was goaded into going through the garbage, however, I saw him handle a few pieces of produce but immediately put them back. He didn't accompany us to our next stop, and left the bag of bagels behind. Why wouldn't a needy person take free food, even it came from the garbage?

The answer is certainly not that harvesting the excesses of the rich is an unfamiliar activity to marginalized people. In response to claims that dumpster diving is exotic or strange, freegans often note that, "Freegans aren't the first people to do this. There have always been people who have lived off the waste of society." "Gleaning"—taking surplus crops left behind from the harvest—was for millennia an important safety net for the rural poor,⁴⁰ so much so that the Bible sanctioned it. Leviticus 23:22 instructed landowners, "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien." In 18th century Europe, gleaning rights were hotly contested as

³⁹ (DuBois 1936; Olson 2009; Post 2012).

⁴⁰ King (1991:474) calculates that gleaning contributed up to 1/8th of household incomes for the rural poor in 18th century England.

early capitalists sought to force peasants to move to cities and sell their labor.⁴¹ The pattern continues to repeat itself around the world: the advance of markets and wage-labor are closely coupled with attempts to curtail the rural poor's access to surplus crops.⁴² Although a modern-day version of gleaning at weekly open-air produce markets continues among pensioners and the impoverished in Europe,⁴³ capitalism has by-and-large successfully made it so people in Western countries can only access surplus food through formal charities or the state.

The United States never had a feudal, peasant economy (slave labor, for a time, did the trick) and, as such, "gleaning" crops does not appear to have ever been a widespread subsistence strategy. Still, the castoffs and leftovers of the well-to-do have frequently served as a resource for the most impoverished Americans. "Rag men" and collectors of surplus household metals were an important, if largely unappreciated, part of the American landscape up through the beginning of industrialization. Until 1878, New York City actually paid scavengers for their recycling services, and until 1910, there were four sorting plants built specifically for gleaning from rubbish.⁴⁴

Although the recycling of materials that scavengers facilitated was integral to the development of American capitalism, the scavengers themselves were never popular. At the turn of the 20th century, progressive reformers sought to eliminate informal scrap collectors, who as members of minority and immigrant groups, were seen as "dirty" and "unruly"⁴⁵—an early example of how the fetish of waste, which suggests that waste is polluted and valueless, can spill over onto people who have *contact* with waste. By the middle of the century, most municipalities

⁴¹ (King 1992; Thompson 1975; Vardi 1993).

⁴² (Scott 1985:118)

⁴³ Black (2007).

⁴⁴ (Medina 2007:35)

⁴⁵ (Zimring 2005:79).

had banned rubbish collectors from landfills, citing health concerns.⁴⁶ With a booming economy, expanding anti-poverty programs, and an economy that increasingly depended more on *producing* waste than recycling it, “the idea of scavenging as a desirable activity for tens of thousands of individuals more or less receded from public favor.”⁴⁷ The new face of waste collection in the United States was not an informal scrap collector, but a municipal garbage man whose job it was to keep waste out of sight and out of mind.

After a several-decades hiatus, though, across the United States, “the trash pickers are back,”⁴⁸ owing to a rise in homeless and the disappearance of blue-collar manufacturing employment.⁴⁹ Ethnographer Teresa Gowan describes how recovering and redeeming aluminum cans for cash gave homeless men in San Francisco a sense of control over their lives and a feeling of working-class pride. Explained one self-described “professional” recycler:

With recycling, you’re not working for someone else; you’re working for yourself, so you don’t have to feel like someone’s getting rich off you. There’s no boss. No one’s making you do it. Okay, the money’s not going to do much for you, but it’s something, and it gives you something to do that’s not just sitting around.⁵⁰

The lives of scavengers, recyclers, and trash-pickers should not be romanticized. Most people engaged in recovering waste do so for lack of a better option, and are poorly remunerated for their efforts.⁵¹

⁴⁶ (Miller 2000:207; Rogers 2005:97).

⁴⁷ (Rathje and Murphy 1992:195).

⁴⁸ (Gowan 2010:151).

⁴⁹ See (Duneier 1999; Ferrell 2006).

⁵⁰ (Gowan 2010:145).

⁵¹ One survey of can recyclers in California found that 56% of “professional” recyclers made less than \$10,000 a year (Ashenmiller 2009:545). As Gowan (2010:155) eloquently observes, “On the street, one’s standards change rapidly, and it is only from within this desperate place that

How do freegans position themselves with respect to their trash-picking brethren? As I discussed previously, one of the “rules” of freegan.info events is that individuals diving “out of necessity” take precedence. While this rule is perhaps problematic in itself—how can freegans tell who’s diving out of necessity versus choice, other than by skin color?—it’s also largely irrelevant. While I’ve come to think that practically every garbage bag in New York gets picked over once or twice before getting picked up, my sense is that homeless people, by and large, aren’t looking for food.⁵² There are some obvious practical reasons for this: by definition, someone who is homeless doesn’t have a place to clean, store, or cook food, so all they can take from the average supermarket is pre-made sandwiches or pizza.

One elderly woman who frequently attended freegan.info tours on the East Side asked me and Janet during the walk between stops why we thought so few homeless people joined our dumpster dives. As she contemplated:

Indigent people don’t do this [dumpster dive for food]. I always see people like me doing it, but I never see homeless or starving people doing it. I used to feel guilty for taking it [food] from the homeless starving people, but the homeless starving people don’t do it.

We do it because we know we don’t have to.

I largely concur with Janet, who replied, “It’s easier for someone who is educated or well-off to not mind the funny looks of strangers walking by.”

Not all freegans are as reflective as Janet about how issues of necessity, choice, and stigma play into people’s decisions to access or not to access ex-commodities. Some freegan

rooting through garbage and pushing a 200-pound load of bottles on a rickety shopping cart begins to seem like a good way to spend the day.”

⁵² I could be wrong: Eikenberry and Smith (2005:191) surveyed 400 low-income residents of Minneapolis and found that 19% of them claimed to have eaten from a dumpster at some point, an astonishingly high figure.

writings, for example, claim that, “Another point in favor of dropping out of the race for more material goods is that a simple lifestyle is more in keeping with our origins as human beings...the less privileged people on our planet just naturally fall into a ‘freegan’ pattern of living.”⁵³ This statement misses the obvious rift between voluntary and involuntary non-consumption. While some homeless scavengers may offer up a critique of the excesses of consumer society,⁵⁴ the reality is that many of them are trying to eke out a place within capitalism, not found a utopia outside of it.

Indeed, the (presumably) homeless individuals who came up to freegans during meetings in public places or trash tours to ask for money were rarely enthused when they were offered food instead. What seems empowering to freegans is a mark of extreme disempowerment for others.⁵⁵ In this respect, a quote from Duneier’s ethnography of unhoused men in New York is revealing. As Leo, a panhandler, states, “I think it’s degrading to go through trash. I would never go that low.”⁵⁶ My own assessment is that even most homeless people who *do* engage in scavenging would rather redeem a few cans or resell some discarded household items to buy something to eat than take food direct from a bin. I thus think there’s virtually no substance to the occasional criticism that freegan dumpster-divers “take” food from the homeless.⁵⁷

Freegans like Janet and Cindy told me they had repeatedly tried to donate recovered items to homeless shelters, and—even though their efforts were invariantly unsuccessful—the

⁵³ (Anon n.d.:48).

⁵⁴ See (Ferrell 2006; Gowan 2010).

⁵⁵ Although Brosius (2013:298) claims that gleaning items from the curb “empowers all members of society, including the poor,” I think this is naïve to the profoundly disempowered position that drives some to adopt the practice.

⁵⁶ (1999:84). In their ethnography of homeless men, Snow and Anderson (1987:1355) observe that while “many street people often engage in this survival activity [dumpster diving],” in stark contrast to the freegans “relatively few pridefully identify themselves in terms of this activity.”

⁵⁷ See Bloom (2010:258).

group occasionally gave it another try on nights with particularly large finds. Still, the group does not see itself as a provider of social services and collectively bristled when told it should become one. One night, a few freegans were discussing the calendar for the upcoming month when Ron, a muscular middle-aged white male wearing a bandana and motorcycle jacket, attending his first freegan.info meeting, butted in: “Why don’t you get some people to get all the food? I see this place on Sixth Avenue, and it’s just throwing out loaves of bread, packaged stuff. You guys could go and get it and take it to the homeless shelter.”

He seemed as though he would keep speaking, but Janet interjected, “We’re actually in the middle of the meeting, and we can answer your question later, but that’s not really what we’re talking about right now.”

Since it was almost time for the regular meeting to end, though, Madeline cut in, “We could actually just address it now.”

Cindy further expounded, “I think there are two different answers. One of them is that we’re a very small group of people and we’re not really set up for something like that. We’re focused on rescuing food rather than redistributing it ourselves. You’re not going to do much effective food redistribution with a granny cart and three people.”

Before she could get to the second reason, Ron began talking animatedly over her, “But you could buy surplus Federal vehicles in Pennsylvania for \$300!”

Now clearly annoyed, Janet responded, “That’s not what we’re all about.”

Cindy continued, “Our focus isn’t on reducing food waste, it’s on dismantling capitalism. We’re not here to give stores an easy out and so that they can feel good about continuing to waste, because we’re doing the work for them to make sure it gets used. Food not going to waste

is a good thing, but giving Trader Joe's a way to up their green check mark and improve their public image, that's not necessarily so good."

As the interchange revealed, for many people, there is a reflexive assumption that excess food should go to feed the homeless. This is partly a result of campaigns by the food banks and soup kitchens that haphazardly fill in for the void of government programs in the United States, which often appeal more to people's concerns about food waste than about poverty.⁵⁸ We might see this as another part of the fetish of waste: the assumption that "surplus food" should go only to feed "surplus people." Never mind, as Adam claimed to have calculated, that New York City alone wastes enough calories to meet the needs of all the food-insecure people in the United States. In attempting to turn food waste into a political issue, freegans were running up against the presumption that the crumbs of capitalism belonged to the poor, a demographic that—far from being victimized by the historically-specific way our economy and society are configured—will "always be with us."

As with the environmental justice movement, there are potential linkages between different actors engaged in political action around waste that freegan.info never sought out, rhetorical solidarity notwithstanding. Global garbage is big business, not just in the sense that the economy as a whole depends on producing waste, but also insofar as waste management itself is a \$1 trillion industry.⁵⁹ Neo-liberalism's push to commodify everything extends even to waste: worldwide, government downsizing has turned over previously public municipal garbage and recycling services to private corporations.⁶⁰ As Merrill Lynch enthusiastically reported, "We are

⁵⁸ (Henderson 2004; Poppendieck 1999).

⁵⁹ (Nahal et al. 2013:1).

⁶⁰ (Bulkeley et al. 2007; Davies 2008; Fagan 2004).

seeing a shift away from waste as a mandatory public service to waste management as a business opportunity,” leaving entrepreneurs with “no time to waste.”⁶¹

Wherever “garbage” has become a new profit-generating opportunity, people eking out a meager subsistence through scavenging are even further marginalized, whether the *zabaleen* in Cairo, *recicladores* in Bogota, or veritable army of 150,000 trash pickers in Delhi.⁶² In New York, Sims Municipal Recycling—a private company with a \$1.5 billion contract with the city—claims that “thefts” of recyclable materials by scavengers cost it between \$2 and \$4 million per year.⁶³ Partly under industry pressure, New York City recently passed Local Law 50, which makes it illegal for anyone but the Department of Sanitation to remove or transport recyclable materials from residential stoops.⁶⁴

While in the next chapter, I describe how freegans’ own attempts to recover discarded food eventually came under assault, their situation was only a continuation of a broader process by which capitalism has perpetually tried to squeeze out those trying to make a living outside the market economy. A fully inclusive politics of waste would recognize homeless scavengers not as primal freegans, but as potential allies with their own complex relationships to waste.

Profligacy, Parasitism, and Hoarding

Freeganism, as should be clear by now, had its limits, both in terms of the people it appealed to and the extent to which freegans themselves could apply it to their own lives. On top of that, though, there were some profound contradictions within those activities that freegans actually *could* engage in: namely, rescuing discarded ex-commodities.

⁶¹ Nahal et al. (2013:15).

⁶² Medina (2007).

⁶³ Rashbaum (2010).

⁶⁴ Lange (2012:29).

On one level, freeganism grew out of a range of consumer movements that sought to limit, or “downshift,” consumption.⁶⁵ In keeping with this, freegans were still scathing in their denunciations of consumers and consumption. One interviewee told me that “Consumerism victimizes everybody in every direction,” while another freegan’s essay observed that, “Consumption and waste are linked by very similar meanings. To ‘lay waste to’ something is to completely destroy, or consume, it.”⁶⁶ Freegans’ visions for the future, too, hinged on drastically restricting consumption. As one freegan told me:

The whole big problem with consumerism is that your worth is how much stuff you can accumulate. What kind of car do you have, how big is your house? But that’s nothing to do with it. I think; how small is your car? How little gas does it take? How small is your house?

In this respect, freeganism really does appear as a form of voluntary poverty, or, as one academic put it, “an expression of scarcity and denial, rock-bottom scrounging that is similar to the survival practices of people who are poverty-stricken and homeless.”⁶⁷

But freeganism’s relationship to consumption, scarcity, and self-denial is a complicated one. Neo-liberal capitalism asks us to accept scarcity now—in the form of limited public services, inequality imposed by the market, or money diverted into savings—in the name of future market-provided abundance.⁶⁸ Freegans, on the other hand, call for a future of scarcity, in which people acknowledge the limits of the biosphere and adjust their consumption accordingly. Yet, precisely because capitalism produces so much waste, freegans are able to live in abundance

⁶⁵ (see Grigsby 2004; Shepherd 2002).

⁶⁶ (Anon n.d.:37)

⁶⁷ (Corman 2011:33).

⁶⁸ See Abbott (2014).

in the present. Freeganism may sound like voluntary poverty but, as one freegan put it in an interview, it's a "decadent poverty."⁶⁹

The fact that freegans are able not just to live, but to live extraordinarily *well* off of the fruits of a system they claim to despise has, unsurprisingly, led to allegations of hypocrisy. Even some anarchists I spoke with told me they perceived freeganism as overly "parasitic." There is, no doubt, some truth to this claim. As Janet admitted at one freeganism 101 event:

People comment 'Aren't you freeloading? You criticize the capitalist system but in the meantime you're living off the fat of it?' And yes, right now we are, because there is the fat of it...It's not our ultimate goal to continue living off this horrible system. But in the meantime while this horrible system exists, we remove ourselves from it and we're not participating in it, we still do need to eat. As long as it's there [waste], it should be rescued.

This paradox—waste was both something "horrible" and something to be "rescued"—played constant tricks on my mind throughout my involvement in the group. I would often engage excitedly in conversations before dives over what I hoped to find, only to catch myself and realize that, no, I didn't want to find *anything*, because I didn't want there to be ex-commodification. Freegans simultaneously wanted the dumpsters to be full and empty: full, to support their prefigurative projects, and empty, to show that those projects were having the desired effect. As Janet once ambivalently put it, "That is the beauty of New York: pretty much anything you want you can get it here. But you can also get it here [waving to the trash]. I wouldn't call *that* the beauty of New York. It's cheaper for us, yes. It's easy. It's convenient. But it's really a tragedy."

⁶⁹ Halpern (2010).

Janet's compulsion to "rescue" ex-commodities often went far beyond any plausible political justification. Later than night, Janet picked up a broken shoe rack next to a trashcan. She asked me if I needed it; when I said no, she told me, "Me neither, but I can't just leave it there." As she herself admitted:

I've been doing this for seven-and-a-half years, and things just start to accumulate. I can quit my job, and quit sleeping, and spend all of my time fixing what people have done wrong with the things they throw out, sorting through their recycling, and finding homes for all it. But it's burdensome to keep on taking charge of the world.

Janet's basement is cluttered with found things—hundreds of dumpster-dived Hallmark cards, dozens of messenger-bag straps, and a packet of inflatable cactus, among others—in various states of disrepair and decay.

Freegan's earliest proponents envisioned it as a movement that cared more about the people, animals, and natural resources that go into producing commodities than the commodities themselves. Nevertheless, as Wendy confessed to me, "We all have hoarding tendencies. It's like, 'I don't need this, but I don't want this to go to waste.' So you become a guardian, but what do you actually do with it?" Marie went even further, telling me, "You can easily become kind of addicted. It becomes like a mission to rescue everything you can." I myself realized how compulsive dumpster diving could become: on nights where I stayed in, I found myself wondering if I was missing the "big find." As I documented in the previous chapter, freegans will often go to great lengths to repair, reuse, and redistribute discarded goods. Yet, in so doing, they gave physical objects—and, in a sense, consumption—a central place in their daily lives.

Some enthusiastically embraced how, by appropriating ex-commodities, freeganism allowed them to absolve themselves of the guilt they would otherwise feel for purchasing

commodities but still engage in consumerist behavior. One study noted that dumpster divers were able to consume fancier items from the garbage than when buying food: as one interviewee put it, “I can’t afford to buy organics at Safeway, but I can afford to take it out of their bin.”⁷⁰ Although I’ve seen less of this mentality within freegan.info, there’s no question that some freegans relish the way dumpster diving facilitates consumption. Leia told me she thought she should probably be more involved in gardening, since that offered a more positive vision for the future of the food system, but that she found it hard to be motivated because “dumpster diving has tastier food.” Christian summarized the attitude some freegan.info participants had towards consumerism when he explained to one reporter, “I’ve dedicated myself to having pretty much the same lifestyle [as I had when I made \$300,000 a year], just without the money.”

Few freegans were quite so extreme in trying to replicate their pre-freegan consumption patterns. Nonetheless, there were moments where freegans engaged in normative consumer behavior, albeit swapping commodities with ex-commodities. At one winter freegan feast, the group held a holiday gift exchange. People unwrapped with glee and laughter dumpster-dived and recycled colognes, soaps, fancy French pens, kombucha, dresses, candy, body oil and a garter, VHS tapes, Christmas lights, and pagan novels. The most communal moment of the evening—where all our attention was focused on a single activity—revolved around consumer goods. One first time feast attendee even asked, with genuine confusion: “Is this about consumerism or anti-consumerism? I’m worried about this becoming its own form of obsessive consumption. I try not to think about buying or acquiring things, but I feel like if I became a freegan, I might spend all of my time thinking about them.”

⁷⁰ Carolsfield and Erikson (2013:259).

Some freegans recognized the dangerous appeal of consuming ex-commodities. As one e-mail sent to the freegan-world e-mail list observed:

In the book *The Overworked American*, Juliet Schor discusses how shopping has become entertainment and so ends up consuming far more free time than it did in the past.

Realizing that shopping was entertainment spurred me in my own life to adjust my views on consumerism and eliminate shopping. I eventually made myself stop dumpster diving for similar reasons. I tended to dive and recover things for entertainment rather than the purpose of getting useful things, and my apartment was cluttered up to boot.

Gio, too, discovered the risks of dumpster diving, and observed of some trash-tour attendees:

I don't want to just show up and take food—although some people do. That's not how I live life. In a way, that's just another way of consumerism. It's getting what you want without really taking responsibility for yourself, for it, and I'm like, 'I'm going to take it, but I'm not just going to take it, I'm going to give back, somewhere.'

But even though Gio strove mightily to have a positive impact on the world, through volunteering, activism, and music, an element of not “taking responsibility” for consumption is inherent in freegan practice. In fact, some would say it's the entire point: freegans, like everyone, have needs, but they don't want to take responsibility for the production of commodities to meet those needs, because they believe that *all* commodities are produced in problematic ways under a capitalist system. The dumpster, in a strange way, actually scrubs the ex-commodities clean, rendering the injustices that went into their production moot.

If dumpster diving allowed freegans to wash their hands of responsibility for the production of the goods they consumed, it also freed them from contrition over what ultimately happened to those ex-commodities. During the course of my research, I came to a strange

realization: I actually wasted *more* food as a practicing dumpster diver than as a normal grocery store shopper. Partly, it's because the food I found—while still perfectly edible—tended to be near the end of its life, and thus went bad quickly. Moreover, when I dove, I didn't worry about taking more than I needed, since there seemed always to be an abundance (and, some might point out, because I'm wasn't paying for it). The result was a surprising amount of waste.

While some freegans actually deliberately took more than they could eat in order to share it or, at worst, compost it, others just didn't worry. One evening, while hanging out at Jonathan's squatted apartment, Marie opened the cupboard and declared, "This bread is getting stale."

Jonathan replied dismissively, "Just throw it out—we'll get more tonight."

Marie hesitated, and Jonathan added, "You're just *re*-wasting it!"

Unconvinced, Marie defiantly took a bite with a loud "crunch" and declared, "Don't waste the waste!"

Ironically, because ex-commodities were free and had been destined for the landfill anyway, many freegans felt comfortable throwing dumpster-dived food out. One resident of Surrealestate admitted, "because we're diving, there's way too much food [and] people aren't worried about leaving it out or throwing it away." At the core of freegans' critique of capitalism is the notion that, in capitalist societies, things that cannot be sold are considered valueless. As Marg Uerite told me, "If something is free, people don't value it. They think it's trash. We're trying to change the reputation of 'free'." In a sense, though, this mentality that free things had no value could apply both to the general public and freegans themselves.

Adam, for his part, was never particularly enthusiastic about consuming anything, whether or not it came from a dumpster. As he cautioned in one essay:

Freegans rescue capitalism's castoffs from the jaws of the garbage truck compactor, defying capitalism's definitions of what is valuable and what is worthless. Since the goods are salvaged and therefore do not support the destruction behind the market, freegans can have a clear conscience about enjoying these goods. But we need to be mindful not to be too charmed by their allure. We know the history of what we consume and always remember the ravages of the culture that produced them.

Yet at times, freegans clearly *were* enchanted by these goods' allure, having not fully broken away from the practices of a culture they sought to challenge. Ex-commodities could become oddly re-fetishized, as freegans used the previous designation of commodities as "waste" in order to deliberately forget about where their products came from and where they went. In this respect, freegans' prefigurative politics—aside from being limited in their applicability and narrow in their demographic appeal—could also be profoundly *not* prefigurative.

7. From Freeganism to Freeloading: Conflict, Backlash, and Decline

Freegan.info's greatest strengths and most intractable challenges could both be tied to the range of people it pulled together under the freegan banner. I have already introduced Leia, a buxom Latina mother in her mid-twenties, whose clothing of ripped fish-nets, black hoodies and piercings suggest her connection to punk and goth subcultures, and Janet, a high school Spanish teacher of slight build in her late-40s. A closer look at their pathways into freeganism, living situations, preferences for political action, and visions for a post-capitalist future speak to some of the fault-lines within freegan.info that eventually cracked open.

Janet came to freeganism through her long-running obsession with eliminating waste and antipathy towards consuming useless commodities, which to her range from 99-cent shower curtains to iPods. The paradox of her thrift, as she told one group of newcomers at a freeganism 101 event, sounding slightly chagrined, was that, "I haven't bought crap all my life, so now I have a lot of money." She continued, now striking a more defiant note: "I own a house. I guess that's not really freegan, but I've got a good job and I've made money and eleven years ago I decided to buy a house. And I wasn't going to get rid of it just because I became a freegan." Janet's house in Queens is nestled in a middle-class neighborhood of white clapboard residences, many sporting American flags. In 2013, Janet completed her teaching obligations and told me that she planned to retire—with a full pension—to her second home in Pawling, upstate. There, she said, she envisioned holding "Really Really Free Markets" and "Swaparamaramas" to share those practices that brought her to freegan.info—recycling and reuse—outside the city.

In contrast, Leia confessed to me that even with her job as a campaigner for the New York Public Interest Research Group, she struggled to make rent for her cramped Brooklyn apartment, which she shared with her grandfather and Tate, the father to her baby. Although Leia

had been involved in activist causes from a young age, she came to dumpster diving out of necessity. In fact, Leia initially joined freegan.info when she stopped paying rent to an abusive landlord, declaring, in her words, a “rent strike.” Christian helped her get legal assistance, and she subsequently became more deeply involved in freeganism as both a way to provide for her family and as a protest against capitalism.

Their divergent pathways *into* freeganism were reflected in their practice *of* freeganism. For Janet, “my activism is my lifestyle, and telling people about it, rather than in protests.” Janet’s commitment to an ethical lifestyle posed its own dilemmas, given her continued connection to the accouterments and habitus of the upper middle-class. She mentioned, for example, her ethical uncertainty about whether she should be willing occasionally to go out to dinner to avoid alienating her non-freegan friends. When it comes to transportation to work, it was easiest for her to drive her car, because she would have to take three buses otherwise. Balancing convenience and ecological concern, she told me she struck a compromise: she often drove her car halfway and took a bus for the rest.

I’m fairly confident some of these ethical impasses would strike Leia as a distraction. Leia is militantly anti-private property, and occasionally used this point to challenge the sincerity of the political commitments of other freegans in the group. She is well-versed in revolutionary doctrine, thanks to her prior involvement with communist groups, and talks about “turning the tables of power” to immediately create a “post-capitalist society.” When Janet described freeganism as “an environmental movement, a social movement, and a community-building movement,” she left out what to Leia was the most important descriptor of all: “revolutionary.”

These differences carried into their respective post-capitalist visions. When I asked Janet about her utopia, she suggested the need for “lots of community while still respecting privacy.”

She envisioned parks, community centers, places for “sitting and talking,” excellent public transportation, mandated recycling, and a “new type of supermarket that doesn’t waste as much.” When I asked her if she identified as an anarchist, she replied, “I haven’t read enough to say, but maybe if I read more, I wouldn’t be [an anarchist] because I’m not sure if anarchists can truly create a world that is respectful.”

For her part, Leia talked about a horizontal and egalitarian economy, “based on satisfying actual needs and not abstract numbers,” in which production would be “geared towards community, people’s real needs.” She added that her utopia would be a direct democracy: “I don’t believe in representative democracy. I don’t see anyone as able to represent me as an individual other than myself.” While Leia hoped that people would rise up to bring this world into being, Janet preferred strict government regulation. In the fall of 2008, Leia won a scholarship for registering the most voters of any volunteer in a nationwide contest—but she admitted that, as an anarchist, she would never vote herself. Janet, on the other hand, wore an Obama ‘08 button to freegan events before the election.

It is hard to avoid the observation that, absent their shared involvement in freegan.info, these two women likely would never meet. Nonetheless, despite these points of divergence, both Janet and Leia worked together frequently on freegan.info projects from 2007 to 2009. During this period, freegan.info pulsed with ideas and energy for freegan projects and actions, pushed forward by a steady and diverse stream of new activists.

How did such an eclectic set of individuals pull together to form a “movement”—a group of people with a coherent (if not always articulated) political goal and strategy to achieve it? Ghaziani and Baldassarri argue that movements are organized around cultural “anchors” which are powerful enough to elicit a degree of consensus while broad enough to accommodate

debate.¹ What made collaboration between Janet and Leia possible was agreement on some basic “anchors.” When I asked Janet, unsure of the response she would give, if she were an anti-capitalist, she replied:

There’s no question among normal intelligent people that this capitalist system is destroying our planet. And it’s appealing to find that there’s a practical activity that people can do. Freeganism is an anti-capitalist movement that encourages people to find alternatives to supporting corporations and buying and using crappy things once to discard.

Using her own preferred terminology, Leia defined freeganism as a “strategic boycott of exploitative industries” that sought to “reinforce communities that stand in opposition to class society and the state” by “getting creative about resources, mutual aid, and redistribution.” In so many words, both shared a belief that ex-commodities exposed the ills of capitalism and should be used to contest it, both through symbolic critiques and direct action to build alternatives.

Leia and Janet share one other thing in common: when I revisited New York in 2012, both had ceased to identify as freegans. Leia had not just left freegan.info, but soured on the label “freegan,” having encountered many self-described freegans who believed that freeganism was just about getting free stuff. She fumed to me, “Not helping out with somebody is anti-communal, it’s not mutual aid, it’s destructive, and it’s freeloading.” Janet used the same term to explain why, despite still rarely skipping a trash tour, she had disassociated from the term “freegan.” “For a lot of people,” she told me, “freegan has a negative connotation, like ‘freeloading’. Often I just tell people I’m an environmentalist.” Both continued to hold anti-

¹ (2011).

capitalist beliefs and engage in waste-recovery practices, but they had ceased to see freeganism as a way to pull these two together. How did that happen?

The Politics of Disappearance, Defense, and Displacement

Thus far, I've talked about the "politics of waste" in capitalist America largely in terms of the political actors who are, in various ways, *opposed* to waste. As universal as the value of reducing waste might seem, though, these movements are up against array of powerful institutions with a clear, if often hidden, interest in promoting and protecting wasteful practices.

Occasionally, the use of political power to spur wastefulness has been blatant. When paper cups were first introduced in the early 20th century, consumers were skeptical: they clung to their reusable tin cups, despite the supposed convenience that disposability offered. Single-use cups were so anathema that soldiers at President Wilson's inauguration in 1913 actually smashed cup dispensers in protest.² Unable to create demand for their product through market means, manufacturers turned to the power of the state, teaming up with hygiene-obsessed progressive era reformers to ban the use of reusable cups on interstate transport.³

Most of the time, though, the use of institutional power and state regulation to promote and protect waste has been less overt. Consistent with the notion of the fetish of waste, the first instinct of both governments and manufacturers when confronted with concerns about waste has been to simply hide it better. By the mid-1960s, the carcasses of eight million automobiles, victims of planned obsolescence, were collecting in thousands of junkyards scattered across the American landscape.⁴ The 1965 Highway Beautification Act did nothing to stop the wanton

² Strasser (1999:177).

³ Ibid.

⁴ (Zimring 2005:104).

scrapping of useful automobiles, but did conceal or move 3,300 junkyards.⁵ This one instance reveals a general pattern: the easiest way to assuage concerns about waste has always been to build a taller smokestack, extend the sewage pipe deeper into the harbor, or locate the landfill farther out of town.⁶ Waste is not just “disappeared” by cultural discourses or everyday practices, but also through the concrete actions of powerful institutions.

Yet there is a stubborn corporality to waste that prevents it from simply passing quietly into the night. Indeed, there are times when waste spills out of the marginal spaces to which it is typically relegated and “bites back”⁷ against the society that produced it. In 1976, residents of Niagara, New York, living in the “Love Canal” neighborhood, began connecting high rates of miscarriages and birth defects to the 21,000 tons of toxic waste Hooker Chemical dumped there two decades prior. The resulting outrage was a pivotal moment in the development of the environmental justice movement. Campaigners called for “extended producer responsibility,” a principle by which producers would be liable for the entire after-lives of their products. Industry’s response, as one DuPont Chemical executive told the U.S. Senate, was to argue, “The disposal of wastes ought to be regulated instead of regulating the nature and use of the product or the type of manufacturing process used.”⁸ In short, if waste cannot be hidden from sight, the second recourse for firms dependent on it has been to defend their right to produce it, often through rhetoric of consumer choice and free markets.

The story of industry resistance to “bottle bills” exemplifies this. Bottling companies used to stamp their glass containers with their names and even send out agents to retrieve them

⁵ Ibid. 128.

⁶ Olson (2007).

⁷ Gille (2008:19).

⁸ (qtd. in Szasz 1994:19).

from other manufacturers or households, a telling indication of how important material reuse was to early capitalism.⁹ During World War II, however, U.S. beer manufacturers introduced the first one-way cans, which proved cheaper to produce and distribute than reusable glass bottles. By the 1960s, however, America's roadsides teemed with discarded cans, which provided a visible and constant case for some kind of government response. During the 1970s, nearly every state in the U.S. considered legislation to require deposits on beverage containers or ban flip-top cans. Those "bottle bills" that passed were wildly effective: Oregon's five-cent deposit achieved a 95% return rate, and New York's reduced litter by 15%.¹⁰ Elsewhere, though, the container industry fought furiously, outspending the proponents of Washington State's Initiative 256, which would have mandated a nickel deposit on soda and beer cans, nearly one hundred fold.¹¹ Since 1972, when the tide of bottle bills ebbed, upwards of one trillion aluminum cans have made their way to American landfills.¹²

A more recent instance of the politics of defending waste has come through the organized resistance to municipal and state attempts to tax or ban plastic bags. Like so many disposable items, plastic bags were something we never thought we needed until manufacturers made a concerted effort to convince us we couldn't live without them. The first bag ban passed in Suffolk County, New York in 1988, but courts rapidly overturned it when the bag makers sued.¹³ The same industry spent \$2 million lobbying the California State Legislature—successfully—to

⁹ Lucas (2002:11).

¹⁰ (MacBride 2012:57,75).

¹¹ (Kelly 1973:77).

¹² (Royte 2005:155).

¹³ Humes (2012).

overturn San Francisco's bag tax.¹⁴ They even sued for defamation one activist who publicized the 500 bags a year each American is estimated to waste by building a "bag monster."

To say that the great waste-makers of American capitalism have been unmoved by public concern about waste, however, would be wrong. Instead, they have worked to channel environmental energy towards small-scale schemes that do little to slow down the movement of commodities on which capitalism depends. In the wake of the first ever Earth Day in 1970, the New York Daily News reported that "more than 200 companies—many of them prime targets for environmentalists—have pledged millions of dollars in cash, time, and services to a massive war on solid waste."¹⁵ Much of this money promoted anti-littering campaigns—like "Keep America Beautiful," famous for the image of a Native American crying over the carelessness of indifferent citizens—that solidly pinned blame for solid waste on individual consumers.¹⁶ These campaigns admonished individuals to put their waste in the right place, but did nothing to discourage individuals (or companies) from wasting in the first place.

Decades of corporate-funded anti-littering campaigns have thus effectively obscured the fact that post-consumer waste is a small proportion of the total waste stream, and that much waste—while directly discarded by consumers themselves—is created by industry practices like planned obsolescence or excess packaging. These same campaigns have insisted that individual consumer activism—the "little things" that "people"¹⁷ can do—is the right approach to environmental problems, as opposed to, say, state regulation or collective direct action. In summary, the politics of waste have centered on *disappearing* ex-commodities from view,

¹⁴ Ibid. The experience of Ireland—which imposed a fifteen-cent tax and saw a 90% reduction in bag use in just a few weeks—is indicative of how successful such measures can be.

¹⁵ (qtd. in MacBride 2012:55).

¹⁶ (de Coverly et al. 2008:295).

¹⁷ MacBride (2012:56).

defending the rights of manufacturers to create them, and reinforcing the fetish of waste by *displacing* responsibility from industry onto consumers.

Each of these three processes has figured into maintaining the continuous stream of ex-commodities on which our food system depends. Statistics on waste are notoriously unreliable in no small part because the actors that actually know how much waste there is refuse to share the data. When one activist contacted retailers in an attempt to access their statistics on wastage, every single supermarket denied his requests.¹⁸ When food manufacturers and retailers do depict their waste stream, it's often a distorted portrait: one report by the industry-funded "Food Waste Reduction Institute" claims that 95% of food manufacturing waste gets diverted to "higher uses," which it later mentions consists almost entirely of feeding animals and spreading excess onto fields.¹⁹

"Displacement" also figures into simultaneously creating and obscuring food waste. In the very first chapter of this book, I described how firms in a capitalist economy are harmed by waste in-house but can benefit from waste elsewhere in the supply chain. For food, the most powerful actors—large, multinational supermarket chains²⁰—are able to push the wastes (and attendant costs that come along with their business models) onto weaker entities further up and down stream. For example, contracts imposed by supermarkets on farmers and processors obligate each to over-plant and over-produce, respectively, to avoid substantial penalties for

¹⁸ Stuart (2009:39). In the U.S., even analysts *commissioned by the industry itself* struggled to get data on waste in the commercial chain (Food Waste Reduction Institute 2013:16).

¹⁹ (Food Waste Reduction Institute 2013:16). Although Mena et al.'s (2011:653) study—not funded by the industry itself—found that landfilling remained the "default option."

²⁰ Schurman and Munro (2010:161) argue that "large supermarket chains have become the most powerful agents in the industrial food supply system, deciding what foods will be produced and how and sending these messages back to manufacturers, buyer/processors, and farmers."

under-supply.²¹ Supermarkets also get around the problem of inelastic demand for food through strategies that wrangle consumers into giving them more exchange value for unneeded use value (and calories). Promotional offers, like “Buy One Get One Free” deals, have received the most attention in this respect,²² but the problem is endemic. Research on food waste shows that waste within households often comes from a mismatch between the quantities people actually want and the quantities in which items are sold.²³ Has *anyone* ever used an entire bunch of cilantro from the supermarket before it went bad?

More recently, supermarkets have faced heightened scrutiny of their waste, partly as the result of unwanted attention brought by groups like freegan.info. Their response has been to evoke the central mythology of free markets: that, in the end, what gets produced simply reflects what consumers demand, and that *anything but* markets should be blamed for waste. One spokesperson for the British Retail Consortium told the BBC, “Most of the wasted food that we have actually comes from domestic waste, so it comes out of homes rather than out the back of supermarkets.”²⁴ When supermarkets were strong-armed into signing the Courtauld Commitment to reduce waste, they pledged only to help in “identifying ways to tackle the problem of household food waste.”²⁵ They have a point, of course: consumers do appear to make a major contribution to food waste, albeit, as I’ve suggested, partly because they’re impelled to do so by

²¹ Institution of Mechanical Engineers (2013:18).

²² See WRAP (2011). The evidence on this is actually equivocal, although consumers surveyed claimed that such offers played a role in 30% of decisions to waste food in household, and the most frequently wasted items—like yogurt, salads, or juices—are among the most likely to have promotional offers.

²³ (Evans 2011; Wansink 2001). For example, Bloom (2010:100) argues that retailers create waste by buying only large fruit, which means that more produce is left on the branches and consumers are often forced into buying items which are larger than they actually want.

²⁴ (qtd. in Stuart 2009:10).

²⁵ Ibid. 210.

the “value-adding” practices of supermarkets themselves. Yet, as with campaigns like “Keep America Beautiful,” displacing blame onto consumers creates an appearance of addressing the problem of waste without getting to the capitalistic root of it.

Garbage-Bag Backlash

Alongside disappearing their waste and displacing the blame, supermarkets have also begun to engage in less publicized acts of “defense”: physically putting ex-commodities out of reach. I argued in Chapter 2 that dumpster divers in New York had a particularly easy time, partly because they were confronted with bags, not dumpsters, and partly because food waste was picked-up (and thus, put out) on a nightly basis. They also benefited from the benign neglect of the stores outside of which they were diving. Most stores have minimal policies for dealing with food waste, so managers had little reason to deter divers.²⁶ And, of course, there’s no question that many store employees feel bad about what they’re wasting, creating an added incentive to turn a blind eye to urban foragers. As Janet observed, “We have stores where we see that the guys who are throwing out the food; they’re not looking at us funny. They know it’s good stuff. But they’re not allowed to take it. They know they’re throwing out good food. They almost sometimes set it up for us, so that it’s easy to take.”

Within the freegan community, and the broader milieu of dumpster-divers with which it is connected, there has long been a sense that this relatively easy access to free food was too good to last. The famed anarchist travel-log from the late-90s opined, “There was a clear trend towards the obsolescence of dumpster diving, disquieting reminders that one day we might all have to get jobs and start paying for things. One by one, slowly, the dumpsters were becoming

²⁶ When one freegan contacted Dunkin Donuts about their waste, for example, the response was that “It is left to the discretion of the individual owner/franchisee of each restaurant whether or not food is donated at the end of the day.”

trash compactors.”²⁷ Yet despite widely shared stories about locked dumpsters, garbage doused in bleach or mop water, and police ticketing trespassers, there was little indication during my research that stores in New York were acting to deter dumpster diving—at least, until I returned in 2012. As dumpster diving became more popular and publicized, stores began to take notice.

One manifestation of this was that some of freegan.info’s more above-board strategies for rescuing food disappeared. Despite their “fight-the-man” rhetoric, most freegans—and predecessor groups like FNB—wholeheartedly preferred *not* to have to go into dumpsters to access ex-commodities.²⁸ A few years prior to 2012, Janet had been caught dumpster-diving at a health-foods store in Queens, but rather than shooing her away, the employee told her, “Don’t do that, we’ll just give it to you.” Subsequently, Janet would go every Monday to pick up between thirty and fifty loaves of bread, which she would then take to a homeless shelter. Eventually, as she explained it, “someone in the store got upset. They saw that I was walking off with the same things that they were buying, and they decided they weren’t going to let us do it anymore.” She added, “Now I just get it from the dumpster, again,” although, as a result, she can no longer donate the food.

Janet offered another example of the same process: a hot-food buffet in the West Village that would let the freegans come in fifteen minutes before they closed to take what was going to be thrown out. “It was always awkward,” she noted, “because there were still people shopping.

²⁷ (Anon n.d.:73).

²⁸ As Keith McHenry from FNB told me, “I’ve generally, from the point of view of organizing, always thought that it’s better to talk to workers and make connections with them, so you can recover from store...The thing about that is that, even though in twenty minutes, you could get the same food from the dumpster, it will be more smashed and in bad condition. More importantly, you aren’t making a relationship with the employees and building more solidarity within the community. It’s not like there’s some horrible thing about getting food from a dumpster, but it is a missed opportunity for more powerful movement.”

They didn't want people to realize what we were doing, so they insisted that we use their containers, not bring our own, and pretend like we were going to buy it." Eventually, however, "They realized how absurd that was" and told the freegans the deal was off. While some store employees might have found it ridiculous to throw away good food, in the end it was even *more* preposterous—within the logic of a capitalist society—to give some people in stores free commodities and then expect others to buy them.

Specific chains of stores also began taking explicit steps to deter diving. Trader Joe's has long had a reputation for "the most abundant and consistent chain of dumpsters in the world"²⁹ thanks to its heavy dependence on packaged, pre-cut salads, and ready-to-eat meals. For this reason, Trader Joe's dumpster was also a favorite spot for freegan.info, which led the broadsheet *AM New York* to publicize the store's food waste exposed during a trash tour. The store subsequently claimed that it donated all of its "good" excess, but Trader Joe's continued to waste so much that it became the object of a 2010 documentary by a group of divers in southern California.³⁰ Although Jeremy Seifert, the filmmaker, did not succeed in getting the company to adopt any policies to reduce waste or increase donations—or even talk to him about the possibility—my conversations with divers around the country suggested that it did lead to one change: locks. As Seifert told me:

I've found a lot of locked dumpsters at some of the stores, for sure. I think they are quietly doing that to avoid more films and videos being put out. They refuse to adopt a corporate-wide policy, which means that they allow each individual store to determine their giving. Some stores might give some of the food, but don't want to deal with fruits

²⁹ (Anon n.d.:251).

³⁰ (Seifert 2010).

and vegetables, so they're going to throw that away... There's probably still significant waste happening, so they're locking dumpsters to avoid the scandal of it.

In New York, Cindy even reported that the police were ticketing dumpster divers—some of whom had driven in from outside the city to partake of the ex-commodity cornucopia—at one Trader Joe's in Brooklyn.

As of 2012, it was still possible to dive at the Trader Joe's in lower Manhattan that had been popular with the group, but more complicated. Jonathan explained the new “tactics” being used by Trader Joe's: “Now, they're waiting until the last possible minute until they put it out—usually like 10:30, right before the [garbage] trucks come.” The dive continued to be worth it, he explained, because, “It's still the best there is: you find things there that you're not going to get anywhere else.” This store was no longer, however, amenable to the slow, educational format of a trash tour. When I accompanied the group to the store one night in 2012, Cindy explained that we were only going because there were no media along, and so no risk of creating a “scene”—arguably the point of trash tours in the first place. The group seemed both excited and nervous as we walked up: we grabbed the bags and scurried off, unseen.

Another example of the growing backlash against waste reclamation came from two D'Agostino stores in Murray Hill. The two were so close—a mere three blocks away—and so abundant in their garbage that their street became one of freegan.info's favorite sites for trash tours. In 2011, however, they abruptly switched from putting out their garbage at 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. As one disaffected diver wrote over the freegan.info e-mail list:

Did we really think that there would be no discernible response to the activities of

Freegan.info from the businesses whose food and material waste we salvage? Here are a

few things that might have grabbed their attention: crowds, blocked entrances/exits and sidewalks, strewn garbage, media attention and dramatic denunciations.

Although the sidewalks outside these stores crawled with non-freegan divers on nights where there were no trash tours—and freegan.info often arrived to find those sidewalks a mess, covered in smashed food and torn bags—many of the “local” divers blamed freegan.info for the change.

In response to these complaints, the group decided to send Janet to talk to the stores to convince them to revert to their old waste disposal practices, and I tagged along. At the D’Agostino on 35th St., we introduced ourselves as “the freegans” and the manager nodded sternly. He told us that the new policy came from the store’s corporate office. When we asked if it was related to the freegans bringing cameras outside his store, he said it was. We appealed to him to consider changing back to the old timing, promising not to bring cameras back. He said that we would have to speak to corporate and that there was virtually no chance of such a change happening. He added that the store donated “all” of its edible food to charity.

From one perspective, it seems absurd that D’Agostino would act to deter dumpster-diving: after all, by putting food in the garbage, the store was essentially stating that it no longer saw any value in it. As one outraged dumpster diver exclaimed: “It’s really obscene, I mean, totally paradoxical; people starting to guard their garbage!” Yet according the most basic prerogatives of capitalism, the amicable *entente* between freegans and stores that existed up to a few years ago should never have existed in the first place. Grocery stores exist to make money: every time someone dives food rather than buys it, potential profit is lost. More importantly, large groups of divers publicly gathering good food—rather than, say, a few homeless people taking mere leftovers—threatens stores’ image, and thus might lead those who still buy food to

switch to their competitors.³¹ The threat to stores from freegans was significant enough that one business journal actually advised managers to begin reading freegan forums to identify potential “branding problems.”³²

These experiences aside, I had always thought that stories about stores putting bleach on their dumpsters were apocryphal, until I encountered it myself. I was going through a dumpster in Paris, chocked full of hundreds yogurts, artisan cheese, and choice cuts of meat. Each of them had been individually cut, and, wafting above it all, the unmistakable smell of bleach (I eventually found the bottle, left, presumably, to drive the point home). I recently spoke to some freegans who said they had encountered destroyed food and bleach in New York, too.³³ These incidents are revealing, because they put to pasture two claims stores often make: that they don’t have time to donate food (slashing hundreds of yogurts certainly takes longer than setting them aside for the food bank) and that whatever they throw out is inedible (if it’s already poison, what’s the need for adding bleach?).

There are anecdotal indications that the pushback against waste reclamation in New York is actually part of something broader. One researcher in Seattle, writing in 2012, concluded that “The proliferation of locked Dumpsters, then, may be proportional to the growing public profile of Dumpster-divers’ cultural and political activities in general.”³⁴ Keith McHenry reported a “nationwide trend towards trash compactors.” Recently, dumpster divers have been prosecuted

³¹ Stores often also claim that they are concerned that divers will re-sell items or return them to the store for cash—practices that I’ve never observed among freegans, but which do seem to be part of the overall dumpster-diving landscape.

³² Nguyen et al. (2013). They mention afterwards that reducing waste might also help stores protect their image.

³³ The practice of actively destroying ex-commodified goods is not just limited to food, but extends to other goods such as clothes (Dwyer 2010).

³⁴ (Giles 2012).

for theft in both the Netherlands and the UK,³⁵ with the Crown Prosecution Service declaring that it had a “significant public interest” in pressing charges against three individuals accused of taking tomatoes, mushrooms, and some cakes from a supermarket bin.³⁶ Freegans in Sweden and Germany wrote the freegan-world e-mail list also reporting growing problems with the police. One Hungarian diver I talked to told me, “You hear the same thing everywhere: it [dumpster diving] is getting harder.”

Still, I don’t believe stores’ actions were a manifestation of some worldwide anti-freegan conspiracy. Instead, I wager that it’s the product of individual companies doing what—in a capitalist economy—is rational (even if the consequences are insane). Grocery store employees, of course, might see through the fetishism of ex-commodities and recognize that the food they bin is good, which is why stores punish such salvaging by their employees.³⁷ But when individuals’ *outside* stores’ purview become aware of this same fact, there is little for the store to do other than lock up its garbage. Letting dumpster divers take ex-commodities was never intentional; it was simply a flaw in the fetishism of waste that, when it became visible enough, stores inevitably moved to correct. As such, what seemed like a simple request from Janet that night we visited D’Agostino—that the store put its garbage out earlier so people could take ex-commodities from it—was essentially a request that the store continue to violate its very *raison d’être*.

³⁵ (de Vries and Abrahamsson 2012; Wardrop 2011).

³⁶ (Gentleman 2014). The charges were eventually dropped at the request of the supermarket chain, Iceland. I’m inclined to think this request was made less out of magnanimity and more out of concern for the bad publicity that would result from going to trial.

³⁷ In 2009, for example, a Whole Foods employee in New York was fired for taking a tuna sandwich designated for disposal (Lee 2009).

Their efforts were at least somewhat successful, partly because of some complexities in the food waste chain that freegans themselves never really analyzed. Namely, although supermarkets' purchasing and selling policies may be "responsible" for a great deal of waste among consumers, producers, and distributors, in-house, they are relatively efficient.³⁸ While food waste in "the system" as a whole may be monumental, much of it was never particularly easy to access. Freegans aren't likely to go glean un-harvested crops from fields, or start rummaging for plate scrapings outside houses. It was thus relatively easy for stores to take action to defend the remaining ex-commodities that freegans, at one point, did have access to.

The case speaks to the limits of a political strategy focused on finding cracks or flaws in the system: eventually, effective political action makes those flaws visible, and they get corrected, even if the system itself stays the same. More specific to freegan.info, the fact that some stores were beginning to reclaim their waste put pressure on the very objects—ex-commodities—that were the "anchor" of freegan.info's politics. It thus exacerbated other conflicts by making waste scarcer and, in turn, rendering the divergent meanings and uses attached to ex-commodities mutually exclusive.

Waste(d) Celebrity?

Even as stores began to protect some of the ex-commodities that freegans and others had discovered, the mass media played its own part in containing freeganism. One simple way was through playing up the disconnects between freegan practice and their stated ideology. A 2007 *New York Times* article on freegan.info glibly noted, "Despite their earnest efforts to separate themselves from the capitalism system, freegans aren't able to avoid it entirely," and, in fact, when it comes to cell-phones or computers, are "dependent on the things they are critical of" to

³⁸ (Bloom 2010:149; Gunders 2012:10).

promote their movement.³⁹ Three years later, another *Times* piece—entitled “The Freegan Establishment”—mocks a group of squatters who “worked their butts off and paid the back taxes and utilities” to get their house, ultimately proving that “they are more conformist than they want you to think they are.”⁴⁰ In each case, contradiction was portrayed as indicative of freegans’ hypocrisy, rather than the inevitable challenges of living justly in an unjust society

At the very least, though, to report on contradictions required the media acknowledge that freegans had *some* ideology. Far more common, however, were stories that ignored the political element of freeganism entirely. As sociologists have observed, for the media “purposes are not photogenic, [but] tactics may be.”⁴¹ Without question, dumpster diving was freegan.info’s most visible and photogenic tactic, and many media stores begun and ended with trash tours, with a much smaller number also attending a freegan feast. The result was a conflation of “freeganism” with “dumpster diving,” as Quinn explained in exasperation:

For the media, it was a freegan freak show. That’s why we got on the media, and then we would take that opportunity to try to show them the bike shop, and they wouldn’t come. And we tried to show them that freeganism isn’t just about recycling garbage, it’s recycling everything, but freeganism wound up equaling dumpster diving to everybody except the members of freegan.info, sadly.

More than that, though, dumpster diving itself was gradually divorced from any conception of the multifarious political ends for which it served. Reflecting on how the words “freegan” and “dumpster diver” were becoming synonymous, Cindy angrily observed:

³⁹ (Kurutz 2007).

⁴⁰ (Halpern 2010).

⁴¹ (Gitlin 1981:121).

I think that's the fault of a lot of the media stories that have happened over the years. If you're digging through the trash in New York, people will come up behind you and say, 'Hey, you're the freegans!' and they have no idea what that means except that freegans are people who dumpster dive.

My own experiences confirm Cindy's observation: more and more often, when I tell people I study "freegans," the assumption is that I study "dumpster divers." While freegan.info itself is partly to blame—dumpster dives were, indeed, their signature event—there's no doubt that simplistic media accounts have also played a role.

The particular *ways* the media portrayed dumpster diving only made this conflation more problematic. In effect, the media worked tirelessly to stitch back together the waste fetishism that freegan.info had been trying to rip apart, by implying that waste really *was* toxic, valueless, and polluted. A media framing that Adam described as "weirdoes with garbage" proved to be a consistent one. A few years ago, an NYU student followed the group for several months, claiming to be preparing a documentary on freeganism. When he screened the film, however, it quickly became apparent that the student had created a short parody of the movement, splicing together clips of freegans performing strange or disgusting acts. Janet recounted, "You could almost hear the audience going 'Ewww' when Wendy ate a rotten-looking strawberry straight from the trash."

Occasionally, the media used expert testimony to discredit freeganism. One reporter for ABC News interviewed a spokesman for the New York Health Department, who stated:

There are too many uncertainties involved about what the food in the dumpsters have been exposed to... We have concerns about the practice [of dumpster diving] mainly because anything that goes into trash has exposure to any sort of food pathogens,

including rat droppings, pesticides, or household cleaners that can be a potential health risk.⁴²

These evocations of health and safety are far from politically neutral. As Mary Douglas observes, “Pollution rules” have the “socially useful function [of] marshaling moral disapproval when it lags.”⁴³ In recent years, dozens of municipalities have criminalized Food Not Bombs’ group feedings of the homeless and (violently) evicted Occupy encampments on the basis of hygiene concerns.⁴⁴ Although I can find no evidence of freegans actually being prosecuted for dumpster diving in the United States, these representations nonetheless help to divert attention from freegans’ fairly intuitive message—that good food should not be wasted—by reinforcing the cultural trope that anything labeled “waste” is intrinsically contaminated.⁴⁵

By 2012, when I returned to freegan.info, those still in the group were worried that the quality of the media coverage was tumbling further. Most major outlets—from CNN to Al-Jazeera to the Colbert Show—had already done a basic exposé on freeganism, and the group had no new projects to regain their attention. Those stories that did come through the pipeline thus focused almost exclusively on freeganism as a moderately amusing subculture and the ex-commodities they recovered as either polluted or useless. One *Wall Street Journal* piece dispensed with freegan ideology quickly.⁴⁶ As the reporter recounts:

‘I’m not participating in a wasteful system’, she [Janet] says.

⁴² Kirplani (2011).

⁴³ Douglas (1966:163)

⁴⁴ (Giles 2013; Heynen 2010; Liboiron 2012; Parson 2010).

⁴⁵ And, of course, these reports rarely mention the 3,000 Americans that die each year from *purchased* food (Center for Disease Control 2011). Nor do they comment upon the substantially higher risks of eating meat (Klein and DeWall 2013), which at least lends plausibility to Adam’s insistence that it’s safer to eat vegan food from a dumpster than meat from a supermarket.

⁴⁶ (Kadet 2012).

That's all very noble, but I'm interested in the whole eating for free angle. Can you really live decently on food found in the trash?

The story then goes on to play-up the dirtiness of food waste, which my own experience suggests reflects a mix of the author's sheer incompetence as a diver and deliberate exaggeration:

I made a recording of my search through the garbage at my favorite produce stand. Here is a brief transcription: 'Gross...Oh god, this is horrible...Cauliflower! My favorite!...Arrr, I can't stand this...Huh, a potato...Oh nooooo...Disgusting...What the %\$!# is this?...Hey, raspberries!'

The report concludes by stating, "You know what's really fun? Slime-free shopping. I'll leave the garbage grub to the freegans."

Indeed, "dumpster diving" seems to have become a running joke in the media, associated with deviants, hipsters, and nutcases—anyone but participants in serious political movements. In one episode of the show "Portlandia," which lampoons white liberal yuppies in Portland, two self-described dumpster divers announce—before entering a supermarket bin—"I don't know why people live any other way." Their finds include baby food, which they claim could be used as a sauce, a "perfectly good" rotting watermelon with a hair on it, a piece of metal pipe that the female diver claims she can use as a sleeve for her shirt, and a tiny, hideous sweater, which the male diver manages to pull over his head in a feat of strength. The next scene shows the two cooking a meal while flies buzz through their kitchen, and then follows them as they discover that all of their friends have canceled on their dinner party (for unstated but obvious reasons). In the end, the male diver states to the camera, "To my friends I say this: 'Okay, you guys win, but who saved more money?' And the answer is really, they did, because all of the energy and work, but still..." While the clip certainly puts its fair share of emphasis on the "ick" factor of

dumpster diving, it also reinforces the ex-commodity fetish by negating the idea that the objects that get disposed of are *actually* useful, at least to anyone in full possession of their mental faculties.

The one genre of media that seemed to have become more enamored with freeganism was reality television. Madeline even showed me a stock response the group had prepared to reject all such requests, convinced that semi-fictional shows looking to include a “freegan” character couldn’t possibly be interested in doing the movement justice. They were probably right. Freegan.info turned down a request from a TLC Show, “Extreme Cheapskates,” which eventually found another dumpster diver. As the profile emphasizes, the woman “dumpster dives for all her food, doesn’t use toilet paper or do laundry, and hasn’t bought toiletries in 10 years.”⁴⁷ The piece goes on to discover that the woman—an employed accountant—saved nearly \$4,000 a month out of an extreme fear of being laid off. While the piece does not use the word “freegan,” it does conflate people who dumpster dive with filth (in this case, dramatized by the woman’s decision not to use toilet paper—something I’ve never heard of a freegan.info participant doing).⁴⁸ In a context where “freeganism” was being treated as a synonym for “dumpster diving,” such associations were undoubtedly problematic.

Once again, we do not need to believe in a secret cabal to see how this happened. The basic pressures of selling stories, appeasing sponsors, and winning favor with politicians lead journalists to offer satire and ridicule rather than complex political critiques and alternative

⁴⁷ (Storey 2012).

⁴⁸ Toilet paper is easy to find outside hotels, which throw away the entire roll after each guest. The *Why Freegan?* pamphlet does, however, extol the values of handkerchief use over disposable tissues.

viewpoints.⁴⁹ Movements, of course, can push back against this, attempting to shape their own coverage or creating new forms of media themselves. For freegan.info, though, the overwhelming number of stories and limited size of the group itself meant that it had little power to shape how it was portrayed, beyond simply saying “no” to some outlets which went on to do their stories about people voluntarily eating trash—their main interest—anyway. They were, in effect, alienated from their own representations, presented with images that “stand outside their ostensible makers...[and] confronted them as an alien force.”⁵⁰ While freegan.info’s successes are hard to imagine without the publicity its engagement with the media generated, its failings—and the shifting public understanding of freeganism that accompanied it—are equally difficult to disassociate from media misrepresentations.

Naming and Shaming

The different external pressures on freegan.info reinforced one another and accentuated pre-existing tensions within the group. The attempts by stores to restrict dumpster diving, for example, highlighted the extent to which freegan.info’s core challenge to capitalism depended on the ex-commodities produced by capitalism itself. Media critics, unsurprisingly, loved to make this point. As one *Times* piece commented:

[There is] a quandary inherent in the freegan movement. Freegans maintain that by salvaging waste, they diminish their need for money, which allows them to live a more thoughtful, responsible and deliberate existence. But if they succeed in their overriding

⁴⁹ Gitlin (1981).

⁵⁰ (Gitlin 1981:3).

goal, and society ends up becoming less wasteful, the freegan lifestyle will no longer be possible.⁵¹

As should already be clear, this critique rests on collapsing “freeganism” into “dumpster diving.” While some of freegan.info’s prefigurative activities used waste as a resource, the values and practices with which they were experimenting—far from being parasitical—were, in their own eyes, experiments in creating a world *without* ex-commodities. Certainly, no freegan I ever spoke to thought that “dumpster diving” had any place in their post-capitalist utopia. As one freegan’s essay on the topic explained it:

It [dumpster diving] is only one aspect of the overall picture. In fact, for dedicated freegans, dumpster diving is actually a negative picture of what we positively stand for. Freegans long for an end of all waste, which would naturally lead to the end of all dumpster diving.⁵²

Still, though, the challenges the group faced once stores began putting out fewer ex-commodities suggested that the group really *had* overemphasized using waste to critique capitalism, to the detriment of developing viable post-capitalist economic or social institutions.

Freegans never had an effective response to the claim that what they were doing was self-defeating partly because they, themselves, could never quite agree on what ex-commodities should actually be used for. As I explored in the first chapter, many anarchists see ex-commodities as a rare bit of beneficence from the capitalist system, a boon which allows them to survive on the system’s margins. Consequently, some politically-motivated dumpster divers—including a contingent of self-identified freegans—reject and oppose exposing this waste to a

⁵¹ (Halpern 2010).

⁵² (Anon n.d.:69).

broader audience, for fear of competition or backlash from stores. Explains one “how-to” guide for dumpster diving, under the heading “Don’t Spoil Sites”:

We don't want to bring unwanted attention to dumpsters. The more people you tell, the more likely it is that someone will go there and fuck things up. Use discretion when telling people about the places you frequent, and if you tell people who are new to dumpstering, be sure to tell them about good dumpster etiquette.⁵³

In their study of freegans in Australia, Edwards and Mercer confirm that:

While many respondents would like to present [dumpster diving] as a public political statement to highlight the waste and inequalities present within the capitalist system, they felt that it should remain a private (or hidden) activity due to the threat of heightened security and potential loss of food supply.⁵⁴

Seemingly confirming these observations, the founder of the websites “trash-wiki” and “hitch-wiki” told me that, while anarchists were happy to share good hitchhiking spots (an inexhaustible resource), they were less likely to contribute the locations of their favorite dumpsters.

Freegan.info, on the other hand, had from the start no qualms about sharing spots, even posting a “dumpster directory” on its website. More than that, though, the group turned dumpster diving from a survival strategy into a public act of protest. This decision earned the group significant criticism. As Janet admitted:

There have been freegans who object to this and say ‘You’re ruining this for us.’ There are stores that don’t like to have the limelight showing all this waste. So there have been issues with them saying, ‘What are you doing? You’re messing it up! They’re going to

⁵³ (Benji and Kaylan n.d.:2).

⁵⁴ (2007:291).

ruin our garbage. They're going to ruin our source.' Not all freegans want to talk to the public about it.⁵⁵

For freegan.info participants, the approbation was worth it, partly because, as I have repeatedly argued, they were more concerned about making their case against capitalism than completely dropping out.

Nonetheless, while there was a baseline consensus within freegan.info that the group *should* engage with the media, there was little agreement as to *how*. In his study of media coverage of the Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s, Gitlin found that “the force of publicity”—especially an overwhelming and unexpected amount of publicity—“strain[ed] the movement at its weak seams.”⁵⁶ For freegan.info, the media circus began swirling immediately, before the group had defined its goals or decided on strategies to achieve them. While the group was anchored by a commitment to contesting capitalism and using waste to do so, much of the rest was left ambiguous, despite numerous failed attempts to come up with a clear mission statement.

One key fault line was over ex-commodities, and whether they were best viewed as precious material resources that allowed some people to partly disengage from capitalism, or symbolic props with which to challenge capitalism itself. This more abstract debate came to a head over the question of whether freegan.info should publicly shame the particular stores that produced waste—in the hopes of getting them to reduce their waste output—versus a sole focus

⁵⁵ This point was confirmed by my interview with Jeremy Seifert, the documentary filmmaker who publicized the waste of Trader Joe's. When I asked him, “Did you face any backlash from dumpster-divers for ‘naming names’?” he told me “Ohhhh yes, so much...I've gotten some hate mail from dumpster divers for sure. The general complaint is, ‘Please stop doing this, you're making this public, and you're ruining dumpster diving for us.’ But I've responded that my goal is not to improve dumpster diving, but to change it [the food system].”

⁵⁶ (1981:92).

on overthrowing “the system” as a whole through using waste as the basis for prefigurative alternative projects. The issue was long on the group’s agenda, and when it eventually came up for discussion, Cindy led off by explaining that, in her view, “given what we’re trying to do as an organization, which is not just promote free living but also target corporations for being so wasteful, maybe naming the companies...would be a good thing.”

Janet then responded that, “Theoretically, I totally agree,” but that she was concerned about antagonizing other dumpster divers, who had been furious after [freegan.info](#) called out Trader Joe’s. She added:

They [Trader Joe’s] didn’t appreciate that their name was in millions of homes as wasteful. It was after that they have security guards at their dumpsters. Those of us that call ourselves freegans—not just dumpster divers—want to call attention to these corporations, but we do have to consider the backlash against fellow dumpster divers and on ourselves.

Leia was even more skeptical of the idea of outing wasteful stores. She insisted that, “If we decide to start naming the names of corporation, I think it should be part of a comprehensive strategy,” noting, “We don’t know what kind of backlash we’re going to get.” Leia seemed particularly concerned about the impact that the freegans’ decision could have on those people who dumpster dive out of necessity. She then talked about redistributing food as an “activist tool” for reaching out to diverse constituencies—such as communities of color—and added that food waste “is a resource that we could be using for activist purposes that could be lost.”

Leia, for her part, was speaking for a broader constituency: when I raised the possibility of [freegan.info](#) “naming and shaming” stores with one prominent individual in the *In Our Hearts*

Collective, he said that as far as he was concerned, that would be “shooting the anarchist community in the foot.”

During 2007 to 2009, the group never managed to come to consensus on whether to name stores. The debate did not break down under clear “radical” versus “reducer” or “anarchist” versus “non-anarchist” lines. Wendy and Adam, who were often on the more extreme end of the ideological spectrum, were in favor of pressure campaigns—of the sort they engaged in with Wetlands—against particularly wasteful corporations. Others, like Jason, were frustrated with the reformist undertones of the idea. “I joined freegan.info because I wanted to boycott *the whole* system,” he seethed.

Eventually, after I departed in 2009, the group did decide to create a “campaigns and advocacy” working group, which, according to an announcement e-mail from Wendy, would focus on “those companies that give no thought to throwing away more food than we can ever distribute, or those who destroy their merchandise so that it cannot be used by people who are trying to give some discarded items a new life.” This focus on stores with “more food than we can ever distribute” and which “destroy their merchandise” was clearly a concession to those worried about losing resources. By this point, though, both the internal energy of freegan.info and media attention had evaporated. As Wendy told me with a sigh, “We’ve done so little with it [the media]. We’ve just done exposing, exposing, and exposing, and if you do that enough, people just get numb to it.”

Troubles with Newcomers

Virtually everyone in freegan.info agreed that the combination of intensified media coverage and the economic downturn led to a major bump in attendance at trash tours starting in 2008. In a moment of deepening economic need and want, there was a growing public awareness

of the free resource that ex-commodities represented, and, on a weekly basis, freegan.info was drawing thirty to forty people to every event. Some of these newcomers, however, were clearly attending to get free food—not to participate in political action.

One night, a well-dressed NYU student joined us. She told me she had come because she had just started college and couldn't stand the food in the dining hall. She enthusiastically grabbed meat and dairy products, stuffing them into a designer handbag. She never offered to share her finds with the group, even after Janet politely admonished her to do so. As I walked with her between diving spots, she admitted, "I'm only interested in environmental things because they save me money. I'm a tightwad. If I turn off the lights or something, it's just because I'm cheap." I offered her a flier for an upcoming series of movies put on by freegan.info's Films and Forums working group on corporate globalization. She waved me off: "I'm an economics and finance major," she told me.

Similar "freeloaders" began attending a range of freegan.info events, undermining the group's sense of shared purpose and the very notion that trash tours and other events were political. At the start of one summer meeting held in Union Square Park in 2012, Madeline introduced herself by stating that she was interested in freeganism as a strategy for "social revolution." A young, thin black woman sitting next to her spoke next, declaring "I've been doing this for years, but when I found out about this group, I think it was really revolutionary." Madeline looked excited at another declaration of revolutionary intent, until the woman explained, "For me, what matters is saving money and cutting corners wherever possible."

The changing mix of motives for participation was evident at monthly Really Really Free Markets. At the RRFMs I attended in 2008, the organizers were often left with *too many* goods, as people brought more than they took away. During an interview in 2012, though, Madeline

explained that the challenge for organizers had shifted: “People come with a giant suitcase and fill it with the brim, or heap it up on a granny cart.” Some of them were genuinely needy, she said; others were “hoarders, and re-sellers. The re-sellers you’re going to find at any yard sale you do, they come and cherry-pick and high-grade.”⁵⁷ Freegan.info, as usual, continued to provide a table of dumpster-dived food, but there, too, she encountered problems: “We were trying to build community, but it was very individualistic. People would come to our table, take some food, and ask, ‘That’s all you’ve got?’ This is something we’re really fighting in NYC right now; it’s hard to attract people with a more communal attitude.” As a subsequent e-mail to the freegan.info list announced, the RRFM organizers decided to ration out the goods on display, rather than putting them out at once, and markets moved from once-a-month to quarterly.

This “freeloader” attitude even undermined freegan.info’s signature event: the trash tour. At one tour I attended in 2012, Janet and Madeline struggled to get people to pay attention to the “waving the banana” speech, rather than comb over the display for choice items. Another student came to a freegan tour around the same time and encountered a “competitive fervor”⁵⁸ among attendees. This ethos seemed to be extending throughout the growing ranks of dumpster divers in New York, as Jason described:

I have encountered, at very rare moments, ‘the frenzy’. Maybe at Trader Joe’s or some of the more popular spots where it’s kind of really caught on at the mainstream level that you can get free food, and you can go there and you can actually see people fighting, elbowing a little bit, thinking ‘How much am I going to be able to get for myself? How

⁵⁷ Similarly, Zaac complained that there had been an “onslaught” of people who were attending his Wild Food Foraging tours hoping to gather and then *sell* the plants they gathered, “absurd as that sounds.” Although certainly not because of freegan.info, foraging (and hunting) in city parks has had enough of an impact that the city has moved to ban it (Foderaro 2011).

⁵⁸ Dougherty (2013:46).

much do I have to give to someone else?’ That breaks my heart, to see that, this thing we were gung-ho about and tried to spread, and maybe we were responsible for letting people know, and they bring that attitude of trying to get more, and that’s a shame.

Madeline confirmed that there had been a major shift in the dumpster-diving situation since 2009:

I’ve seen other people do what I would call ‘competitive dumpstering’...Somebody wrote to the ask box [the freegan.info e-mail account], who knows people who dumpster but won’t tell her where the dumpstering sites are that work. So there are elements of people who are dumpstering out of desperate need, hoarding, or other reasons, who are very much capitalist-friendly.

The rising popularity of dumpster-diving was problematic, too, because outside the (semi)controlled context of a trash tour, dumpster divers often left bags ripped or untied, giving stores further reason to act to deter waste reclamation.

For freegan.info, problems came not just from “freeloaders” who came and went from events with no sense of freeganism’s political content, but also “low key” freegans who attended *many* events despite having little interest in anti-capitalism. Freegan.info’s trash tours—by the assessment of Janet or Madeline—were by 2009 drawing large numbers people with “stable, boring lives” who were loosely concerned about waste and the environment and looking for a social activity. One night, I managed to initiate a conversation with a frequent attendee whose name no one in the group knew. She hesitantly revealed that she taught in English at a nearby university. I asked her “Where?” and she told me, “I don’t really want to say.” She then added, “I live in a doorman building in this neighborhood. I don’t know what they think of me at night [when I’m dumpster diving], but I don’t care.” When I asked her why she was so secretive about

her freeganism—refusing to give her name, agree to an interview, or to be shown on camera—she explained that, her previous comment to the contrary aside, she was afraid of the way people would judge her if they knew that she ate discarded food. Sounding almost distraught, she carried on, “I can’t tell my husband, I can’t tell my friends. My best friend of my life I can’t tell. I can’t tell my students.” I am certainly sympathetic to her concerns about stigma, but it made it difficult to connect her concern for reducing waste to any broader agenda for social change.

It would be unfair to call these attendees “freeloaders.” Yet their contribution to the group’s collective political project—whether of exposing capitalism’s wastes or prefiguring an alternative—was minimal. One woman in her mid-40s, who had been involved in the group for over a year, explained to me:

I’m interested in it [freeganism], but I don’t need to be outspoken about it...I don’t like to hear a lot about politics, which I think would put me off in a sense...I know why I do it [dumpster dive]. But I don’t need it to be something that is out there. If I’m actively asked to participate, I’m the type of person who will say, ‘You know, maybe I don’t want to.’ I’m happy doing things in my corner of the world, partaking in what I want to partake in, but I don’t necessarily want to be active in taking my freeganism to the world.

Although freegan.info had long tried to frame freeganism in an appealing way, it had always brought those framings back to an overarching rejection of key tenets of capitalism. This woman, though, found the rhetoric about capitalism problematic: “You’ll get more people involved if people just get involved slowly, rather than being scared into something. I guess that’s why I’m more for the low-key approach.”

Such “low-key” freegans’ relatively apolitical orientations changed the tone of the group in a way that scared off “rebels” and “radicals.” Jonathan, a consummate “rebel” who described himself as a “anarchist-nihilist,” talked about attending a freegan.info action in 2012:

I was so disappointed! It started with, ‘We’re against capitalism and we’re going to show you this waste’, but then, in two minutes, everyone forgot about that first part and it was just about getting free stuff. Everyone was grabbing things as quick as they could [and] no one was sharing.

When I asked if he planned to go back, he said, “No. No one is an anti-capitalist there. Like, there are *no* radicals. When I told people about my lifestyle, they were like, ‘*whoooooa*.’” These frustrations extended to those who had already been involved in the group for a long time. Madeline, for example, announced she would be taking a break from involvement in the group after one feast where several ‘regulars’ showed up just for the meal—not to cook—and failed to bring any of the items they had collected with the group the night prior.

If anything, this section on “freeloaders” and “low-key” freegans is a reminder of the powerful hold that the individualistic “spirit of capitalism” can have, even in a nominally anti-capitalist movement. In a culture that glorifies consumption as the pinnacle of political engagement, it is little surprise that some would flock to trash tours as others might stampede at Black Friday sales.⁵⁹ Madeline was circumspect about this, but also acknowledged that it created real limits to the impact of prefigurative politics: “It’s the problem of any of these mutual-aid activities within a capitalist society. Everyone is trying to do the best they can within a capitalist society, and for some people that means getting one-up on other people who are around.” For

⁵⁹ Indeed, Marx points out that there is nothing more capitalist than getting something for free: after all, it is the un-paid labor of workers that creates the surplus value and profit on which capitalists depend.

their part, low-key freegans filtered freeganism through a widely-diffused cultural lens that limits “politics” to personal lifestyle decisions and views more confrontational claims on others as inappropriate.⁶⁰

A pure logic of direct action views the reasons for participating in an action as irrelevant. As Graeber writes, direct action “collapse[s] the political...into the structure of the action itself.”⁶¹ Yet, as the case of freegan.info indicates, the *meanings* attributed to actions do matter. It was a shared understanding that ex-commodities should be used for political action that pulled freegan.info together; the eroding of this mutual understanding pushed the group to the outside of New York’s anarchist scene and scared off potential activists like Jonathan.

Theft and the Clash Between “Anti-Capitalists” and “Anti-Wasters”

The purpose of “cultural anchors” in social movements is to provide shared points of reference that prevent debate and disagreement from spiraling out of hand. Part of why freegan.info could have sprawling, often heated, discussions of weighty topics like whether the group should seek to overthrow civilization (i.e., primitivism) or the state (i.e., anarchism) was because there was still a sense that everyone was on the same page when it came to developing alternatives to capitalism through waste.

During my time with the group, though, one issue proved so divisive that some even suggested I keep it out of this book: shoplifting. I include it, though, because it highlights the wildly different understandings that people—often individuals who had never been to a freegan.info event and were sending e-mails from far-flung parts of the world—held of

⁶⁰ See, e.g., (Bellah et al. 1985; Eliasoph 1998; Greenebaum 2009; Lichterman 1996).

⁶¹ (2007:407).

freeganism. These conflicts called into question whether freeganism had any “anchors” at all, and set the stage for the departure of many of the group’s key players.⁶²

Shoplifting is normalized in certain segments of the anarchist community.⁶³ Within the East Bay Food Not Bombs community I studied, activists casually talked about stealing commodities ranging from toothpaste to appliances. When Sasha returned from his “squat tour” in Barcelona, he too spoke of shoplifting as if it were an obvious choice for those unwilling or unable to work:

There was like a family of four in one of the squats we were at that had like a two-year-old and a ten-year-old, and the parents weren’t making money. They needed dairy, bread, and lentils that weren’t dumpster-able. So they would go to the store and steal because they needed to support their family.

The logic of direct action—to take things, rather than ask for them—actually makes shoplifting more intuitive than purchasing. As Jason explained:

If you want it, that’s your license to take it. It’s what we need to live. There should be free food. We die if we don’t have it. So what reason should there be that we have to pay into this complex system where we’re working for these tokens that we exchange? That doesn’t make any sense at all.

From some activists’ standpoints, shoplifting is actually *doubly* effective because it meets material needs while cutting into capitalists’ profits.

⁶² Other authors have pointed out how debates over tactics, since they involve what groups actually *do*, are frequently more divisive than debate over ideology (Munson 2008).

⁶³ (Clark 2004; Gross 2009; Shteir 2012:Ch.4).

Shoplifting's place within freeganism is, however, ambiguous. The pamphlet *Why Freegan?* raises shoplifting as one possible way to get off the grid, but—unlike every other tactic it mentions—is equivocal about whether it “counts” as freegan:

Shoplifting: There is some debate over how freegan this really is because you are still creating an empty shelf that must be restocked, but it is more freegan than forking over big bucks. This is a more direct attack on the store selling the goods, not the producer (unless you hyper-boycott a product: pick something you can't stand and consistently get it off the shelves, steal it, break it, hide it, just eliminate it and the store will eventually stop selling it) so you should consider if you are putting a ma & pa organic veggie stand out of business or just chipping away at a corporate giant.

Yet freegan.info's own literature makes no mention of shoplifting. I've never heard it raised in a “waving the banana” speech and stealing is not once referenced among the thirty-nine different strategies highlighted in the group's “Freeganism in Practice.”

Once in 2009, Adam—in his capacity as “moderator” for the “insane asylum” that was the freegan-world e-mail list and its several thousand subscribers—posted an e-mail from an acquaintance who was looking to gather different viewpoints on shoplifting for a research project. Both Adam and the researcher were clear that they weren't endorsing shoplifting, just asking for opinions on it. Caveats aside, over the next few days the list was flooded by hundreds of hysterical messages on the topic. Many expressed immediate and unequivocal condemnation of any discussion of shoplifting being associated with freeganism:

I will be unsubscribing [from this e-mail list]. Shoplifting is stealing... plain and simple.

And it does not contribute to a ‘free’ or ‘freegan’ lifestyle. It is simply wrong. You made

a poor judgment call by including this request in the list. It negates all the effort done by freegans to have their lifestyle accepted and even honored in some cases.

E-mails such as these expressed a reflexive condemnation of stealing, apparently on the basis of an assumption that it was wrong to violate private property. The response from some of the list's self-styled anarchists was equally un-nuanced:

As far as I'm concerned there is no argument to be made that stealing from a bunch of murderers and con artists is immoral. One can make an argument for how functional it is and to what purpose it serves, but not that it is immoral. To say that it is immoral to steal from them is to say that you uphold the structure of class society and you think it is justified for bourgeois class to steal from the masses but not for the masses to take back what was rightfully theirs [sic]. And I think that's an inherently unfreegan argument.

As the last line suggests, this single tactic raised profound questions about what freeganism actually *was*, questions that the group had fairly deliberately avoided answering.

Among the activists who were actually involved in freegan.info, the debate was more considerate. Many perceived shoplifting as problematic because it was a "faulty tactic, both lazy and ineffectual." Stealing, one freegan explained, creates a "demand for products that are made by sweatshop workers on stolen land from mismanaged resources that destroy the environment or are tested on tortured animals." As another added, shoplifting puts "hypocritical blood on your hands" because it leads individuals to possess "products you claim to hate." Madeline told me about a discussion she had with a much younger anarchist who had just shoplifted a blouse:

I told her, 'Maybe just wear an old one, and make it more your style. Altering it.' For this person, that was like, 'Hah!' There is still a mindset that, all this stuff is being dangled in front of our faces, direct action means just going ahead and taking it.

She went on to reflect on how the debate captured some of the enduring challenges of escaping capitalist patterns of consumption:

Shoplifting is like waste, in that it starts with overconsumption, and starts with a sense of entitlement and deprivation. What does it mean to actually be deprived? If you feel deprived of that new fashionable blouse, are you really deprived? Or is this something akin to racism telling you black people are inferior to you, or homophobia, saying that you are less worthy as a person if you're gay. It is that kind of feeling that we hear in ourselves, that, I have to have this, and I have to have it or I'm deprived. Isn't that capitalism talking to us, not our own feelings?

Others, despite their own misgivings about shoplifting, felt that the debate was a disturbing example of how moderates and liberals were co-opting freeganism. Adam, while noting that he himself did not shoplift aside from occasional scams he used to copy freegan literature, pointed out to me that "You can't have a revolution without stealing."⁶⁴ For him and others, like Jason and Leia, the acrimony among supposed "freegans" for merely raising the idea of shoplifting suggested that many people attracted to freeganism were far from revolutionary.

Indeed, some self-styled freegans of the "low-key" variety began claiming that being against waste did not entail being against capitalism. Explained one e-mail:

I see now that I have to state my reason to call myself a "Freegan," I just hate waste. That is why I want to be a Freegan, because I am quite willing to dumpster dive to stop things being wasted. I think that about covers it. Not to take what is someone else's property. I

⁶⁴ Although, interestingly enough, after he left the group, Adam openly endorsed shoplifting in one interview, arguing "We shouldn't ask 'is it ethical to shoplift'? Rather we should ask, 'is it ethical to buy.'" He then proceeded to lay out some guidelines for shoplifting: take only necessities (not luxury items), don't resell items, and target major corporations (Shteir 2012).

therefore, obviously believe in owning property. I value mine and look after silly things other people would think of as rubbish, but in my eyes I see value and use [*sic*].

Leia was outraged: “The real tragedy is the waste? Say nothing of the exploitation of workers and resources that went into making the product?” Another e-mail list subscriber, though, was encouraged by the first e-mail and responded:

I am affluent and own several businesses (all successful) but get most of my stuff for free and never hesitate to stop and trash pick or jump in a dumpster to hunt down items to keep out of the landfill. I am very in favor of capitalism, just not corporate or business irresponsibility to the communities in which they operate and supposedly serve.

“If you are looking for a pro-capitalist hang-out, go to some sports bar,” one person shot back.

The issue grew more complex when, with the proliferation of locks on dumpsters, making use of wasted resources increasingly undeniably meant violating private property. When one message came across the list mentioning that a favorite dumpster had been chained shut and put behind a fence, one freegan replied, “I’ve got two words for you: BOLT CUTTERS.” The resulting condemnation from pro-property, anti-waste freegans led to one pedantic excursus on the real meaning of freeganism:

When a store locks their dumpster, they don't want people to take things from the dumpster, they want people to go inside the store and buy things. Taking things from an unlocked dumpster may seem free, but it isn't because it costs the store money from the profits they would make if people bought things instead of diving. If the goal is to respect private property and corporate profits, and to seek respect from capitalists, then the best way to do that is to buy things instead of diving. Capitalists will have much more respect

for you if you buy things than if you dive...Capitalism is legal but often amoral.

Freeganism is moral but often illegal. It is a question of values.

The amazing thing was that all of this conflict happened over an activity that virtually no one in freegan.info was actually engaged in.

A similarly heated argument opened up over a related issue a few years later, “train-hopping.” This time, though, it drew in heavily involved freegan.info activists, reflecting the growing breakdown of consensus about the meaning of freeganism within the group. One participant proposed that the group delete the website’s reference to “train-hopping” as a freegan form of transportation. Her e-mail made it clear that she understood “train-hopping” to be an act of “petty theft” that entailed avoiding fares for public transportation. Some quickly pointed out that “train-hopping” typically meant jumping on *freight* trains, essentially taking advantage of their excess, unused capacity to carry people. As such, according to Gio, train-hopping was “trespassing, maybe, definitely illegal, not very reliable, and pretty dangerous. But freegan nonetheless...whether you like it or not.”

Cindy attempted to calm the discussion down by reverting to freeganism’s anti-waste anchor, reassuring the original sender that “Train-hopping...is the same, basically, as squatting, guerrilla gardening, dumpster diving and any number of other ways freegans use resources that would otherwise go to waste.” She added that freegan.info took no official position on shoplifting and pleaded, “Can we agree that making use of wasted resources is a good thing? And agree to disagree on the rest?” The problem, however, was that by the time of this debate, the meaning of “making use of wasted resources” had already become contested.

Discarding Freeganism

As conflicts within the group grew, various individuals floated proposals to resolve them. Some wanted to break freegan.info into autonomous projects, so some could hold trash tours, others could pressure corporations to reduce waste, and another set could focus on prefigurative projects like gardens or squats—with all three calling themselves “freegan” at the same time. Adam repeatedly pleaded for a moratorium on trash tours and on interactions with the media until the group took the time to articulate its long-term goals and strategies. Jason proposed various ideas for limiting the attendance of “freeloaders” at freegan.info events. In the end, though, none of these proposals came to fruition—in part because many participants had begun to abandon the very label “freegan” itself.

A major blow to the group came in 2009, when a landlord hoping to cash in on Bedford-Stuyvesant’s rapid gentrification evicted the 123 Community Center and the freegan bike workshop.⁶⁵ For a short time, Wendy and Quinn shuttled the bike parts between activist houses and cooperatives, but they could never find an affordable space. Wendy admitted that, with the closure of 123, “We really lost our sense of community” as well as freegan.info’s most frequent recurring activity that was not dumpster diving. Madeline, too, commented on how “having the primary activity have something that can be one-off for participants”—i.e., trash tours—meant that “we’re not really building community,” adding, “To build a bike workshop, you have people committed to taking shifts, gathering parts, maintaining a stock of parts. You can drop into a trash tour and never come again, that’s the thing.” The bike workshop had given freegan.info a plug-in point for activists with a particular set of skills and interests, which it lost with its

⁶⁵ The quick demise of another freegan project in Boston—the “Gleaner’s Kitchen”—confirms the unwillingness of most landlords to play host to prefigurative projects, particularly those that blatantly violate health codes (Christian 2014).

closure. It had also given freegan.info the credibility of an ongoing, prefigurative space in a low-income community. As the group's scope narrowed, so did the range of people involved in it.

Another key source of frustration—cited by several freegans as their reason for departure from the group—was the sense that, as the debates over shoplifting suggested, freeganism was increasingly devoid of political content and severed from its anarchist roots. Speaking about his disillusionment with cooperative “freegan” living in Surrealestate, Quinn told me, “You really do have to find people who have a mature understanding of capitalism, and an analysis of the way it works, and that can envision a different way of functioning... There are only so many people who have that vision and have that commitment.” He paused a few seconds and added, “And if you don't have that, you just become a mooch.” For many, the increasingly individualistic and reformist orientations of the people coming to freegan events meant that freeganism itself had become exactly the kind of consumer activism they thought they had rejected.

In spite of this, all but one of the one-time freegan.info participants I re-interviewed in 2012 was still heavily involved in political action. Some had moved even further towards direct action and anarchism. Sasha, for example, spent time in Tucson with a pirated radio station and anarchist infoshop before moving to Portland to work for an ecological press. Jason, despite having left the group, continued to dumpster dive on his own and with his roommates, explaining how he was building on what he saw as the “kernel” of freeganism: “I like the idea of setting up networks of mutual aid, figuring out, literally, physically, how to do this simple idea, which is reclaiming waste, and using it for the benefit of everyone, outside of capitalism.”

Freegan.info as an organization continues, at the time of this writing, to hold twice-monthly trash tours, monthly freegan feasts, and occasional wild food foraging tours or reading groups. It has been sustained primarily by the strong commitment of Madeline, Janet, and Cindy.

Cindy commented, during our second interview, on what kept her engaged as well as her own frustrations:

We consistently get thirty people coming to our events, and maybe one-half of them are new. They're interested and they're learning and they're having their eyes opened. I understand the frustration that the same three people shouldn't be doing trash tours for seven years, that there should be new people who are leading them. I don't think that's a fault of the trash tours, maybe it is a fault of outreach skills and people skills and things like that. I think it's just been unfortunate that there hasn't been the energy level to do other things.

As I could see myself in the meetings I attended, the group persisted in attracting new people, but struggled to find anyone with the energy to organize skill-shares or re-start the bike workshop. Although by 2012 the media coverage had tapered off, there was still an uneven inflow of journalists. Moreover, by Cindy's assessment, the group had actually "sharpened its political criticism" by coming to a consensus on advocating for a reduction of waste: "We're not a pro-dumpster diving group, we're an anti-capitalist, anti-waste group. So now we agree that if waste is reduced and people can't dumpster-dive anymore, that's a victory, not a loss."

The fact that freegan.info persevered in being at least loosely connected to the anti-capitalist scene in New York was indicated by the fact that, in the summer of 2011, the initial organizers of Occupy Wall Street got in touch with freegan.info. Jason described how OWS was rooted in a field of direct-action, anti-capitalist movements that freegan.info had played a small part of keeping alive during a nadir of mobilization in the late 2000s,⁶⁶ explaining, "Occupy didn't come from the mainstream. It came from the fringes...it was used as a leverage point for

⁶⁶ His account of Occupy's origins is consistent with that offered by Milkman et al. (2013).

anarchists to have an event, try to get people to organize. Lots of people that were involved in Occupy were people that also used to come to freegan.info.” Gio, who claimed to have been one of the first campers in Zuccotti Park near Wall Street, also saw a connection between freeganism and Occupy, noting, “I think in many ways freegan.info, maybe along with all those other little activist factions and issues that people have been talking about for years, and it all just kind of like coalesced. I think of like, the ‘big bang’.”

What were these similarities that freegans cited? Janet noted the affinity between their critiques of capitalism: “Occupy Wall Street isn’t about waste per se, but it is about excess: excess bonuses, excess profits.”⁶⁷ As with freegan.info, the question of what could or should be “commodified” was at the forefront of Occupy’s politics: as one occupier explained, “It [Zuccotti park] is a non-commodified space in the heart of global capital...It’s like you’re inhaling this clean mountain air because people could relate to each other in public space but outside the market.”⁶⁸

Freegans were attracted to the tactics of OWS as well as the message. In fact, some perceived it as a far more successful instance of what freegan.info had been trying to do for years: engage in very public anti-capitalist direct action. Jason cited the encampment’s prefigurative elements as a major draw for him:

What were the occupations themselves but big camps of mutual aid networks, people setting up free everything—free food, free books, free clothes, free housing? It was all just a big free place to live. In Zuccotti they didn’t have infinite resources and room, but

⁶⁷ As one researcher observed, the movement’s discourse centered on the claim that “things that ought not be discarded have been wasted and trashed by the wealthiest 1% of society, banks, governments, and corporations” (Liboiron 2012:400).

⁶⁸ (qtd. in Milkman et al. 2013:26).

for the people who were there, it was an outpost of mutual aid. What happened inside—aside from the spectacle of it, the news story—was a freegan paradise, a utopia. Maybe not really a utopia, but that’s what they were trying to make.

Reflecting its anarchist roots, OWS expressed its prefigurative vision partly through waste. In its heyday, “Zuccotti boasted a greywater system as part of the People’s Kitchen, a bike-powered composter whose compost was cycled to several nearby community gardens, a recycling depot and a refuse station to fuel the movement’s cardboard aesthetic.”⁶⁹ In fact, Jason, Wendy, and Madeline all said that they helped dumpster dive supplies for the occupation before donations of food rendered doing so unnecessary.⁷⁰

While freegans, ex-freegans, and freegan practices all played a significant role in Occupy, freegan.info itself did not. Madeline admitted that, with respect to Occupy, “I don’t feel like there was a ‘we’” that got involved, even though she and Cindy both were arrested at an Occupy demonstration. Cindy herself admitted:

Freegan.info in New York was pretty isolated by the time Occupy came around. There were some people in the group who were very involved in Occupy and a lot of people who weren’t. We talked about making those connections, but we didn’t have the energy to make a concerted group effort to connect.

As I could see for myself at the freegan.info meetings I attended in late 2011 and 2012, the constituencies involved in freegan.info outside the core organizers were not people for whom Occupy was particularly interesting. These were individuals interested in personal, small-scale action around waste; Occupy was a large-scale, collective challenge to global financial

⁶⁹ (Liboiron 2012:397).

⁷⁰ (see, also, Nir 2011).

capitalism. While the old anchor of freegan.info made seeing the connection between the two easy—which is why so many former freegan.info participants got involved in OWS—the group no longer had the shared sense of purpose that made involvement in the upwelling seem like an obvious choice.

As Keith McHenry from Food Not Bombs pointed out in our interview, freeganism was—at its inception—just a joke. One group of people in New York, taking advantage of a particularly favorable urban environment, tried to turn it into something else. All things considered, they were remarkably successful: they made ex-commodities into a potent symbolic critique of capitalism and a resource for prefiguring alternatives. But this small group was always arrayed against much, much bigger forces: stores with the power to lock their dumpsters, media which could misrepresent them with impunity, and a series of cultural norms that led many people to either actively imagine waste away or see ex-commodities as a bonanza of free stuff to be gobbled up. These forces, when combined with contradictions and conflict within the group, eventually undermined the shared meanings that sustained freegan.info and pulled the movement apart.

Freeganism has largely returned to where it started: a set of diffuse practices with no clear meaning or strong organizations to promote it. But most freegans themselves remained politically engaged, regardless of the labels they chose. This finding should not be surprising. Freeganism resonated at a particular moment in time, but the commitments of activists themselves to freeganism were always fluid. As Lola reflected to me, “Realizing what you believe and trying to live that is very complicated and something that a lot of people—especially myself—are going to spend the rest of our lives trying to figure out.” Becoming a freegan, as

Sowmya explained, was a “wonderful journey,” but for some, it proved to be more of a step along the way than an endpoint.

CONCLUSION: THE AFTERLIVES OF FREEGANISM

When he had finished his almost encyclopedic recounting of the injustices that went into the individual commodities we had encountered on that cold December night in 2008, Adam switched into a more contemplative mode. Usually when he “Waved the Banana,” Adam looked away from the cameras, but tonight, he addressed them directly:

What we are doing is building up an extensive global archival record, documenting the enormous waste of resources in the U.S., that is being beamed all over the world. Being that this probably will be the record for some time, I have a question: when we think about people in twenty years, and in forty years, looking at this footage, we wonder, ‘What will they think of all of this needless waste of resources?’

He then switched from a professorial tone to one of an eschatological preacher, calling into question whether *anyone* would be able to look at the footage at all:

We know that global industrial economic capitalism is on the verge of total collapse. We are in fact in the final days of Rome. While there is still bread on the shelves, and our newspapers are still filled with the idiot circuses of Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, all of these distractions are frankly failing to keep people from realizing that the end really and truly is near.

I spoke with Adam again later that night in the privacy of the Surrealestate basement. I asked him if he was serious, and he nodded, “It’s time for us [humans] to pack our bags and go, and I don’t mean colonizing the stars.” He probably could tell I looked skeptical, and so added, “Now, how practical is that?” before answering, “Well, very. Because barring a miracle we’re not going to see the end of the 22nd century, and quite possibly [not] the end of the 21st.”

Although it's difficult to capture the moment in retrospect, within a particular conjuncture and context, what Adam told me felt entirely plausible. In the ideological soup of freegan.info, talk of climate change, biodiversity loss, peak oil, and even avian flu melded together into one dire appraisal of humanity's present course. The economy was in free fall, and New York was the epicenter of a crisis that seemed to be deepening with no end in sight. Back at my university in New Jersey, where I was writing the senior thesis that eventually would turn into this book, graduates who previously would have been funneled directly into investment banks on Wall Street were suddenly confronted with the prospect of unemployment. With even *Princeton* students taking an interest in freeganism, I thought I was describing reality—not an aspiration—when I wrote, “freegan values and practices are exploding *everywhere* right now.” Caught up as I was in a host of freegan projects, and enthralled by the ineffable charisma of freegans like Adam, I really did believe—as Jason once avowed—that we stood at the “fulcrum of history.”

It almost goes without saying that the fact that I'm still writing this book—and not, say, out foraging some wild burdock root in post-industrial ruins—suggests that Adam's predictions were off the mark. In fact, within a few months of his “waving the banana” speech, Adam was gone. He stepped back not just from freegan.info, but from the very word he was so instrumental in popularizing, “freegan.” To him, freeganism had ceased to be a movement looking to create a “robust mutual aid economy” that could fulfill people's basic needs and serve as a “global counter economy to capitalism.” It had, instead, turned into a list “fifty little things you can do to save the environment,” a “political veneer on a money-saving hobby.” In his eyes, too many freegans were unwilling to name the root of the problem: capitalism. When I asked him if perhaps not mentioning capitalism was strategic, he noted, “Can you be anti-racist if you avoid

saying you are anti-racist? If you really think capitalism is a life-destroying, soul-crushing, planet-killing system, there's no reason not to say so."

Often, when I talked about my research on freegans with people who had only a cursory knowledge of the movement, I was assured that, by the time they hit thirty, freegans would be driving Saabs and shopping at Whole Foods.¹ Now in his mid-30s, Adam—like most of my informants—shows no signs of abating in his activism. Instead, when last we talked, he was organizing furiously against the Trans Pacific Partnership, a trade agreement that he saw as a harbinger of worsened animal abuse and environmental destruction. "It's depressing work, honestly, fighting to keep things from getting worse with little hope of success," he told me. Then again, a belief that he could actually *stop* injustice was never a precondition for Adam's attempts to do so. He had backed off some of his rhetoric about "dropping out" of capitalism—telling me he was "way too much of a privileged motherfucker to be preaching to anyone about how they should live"—but he certainly wasn't shopping at Whole Foods.

Sociologist Kai Erikson once suggested that the first aim of any ethnography has to be to "get the story straight,"² and to an extent, that is exactly what I have tried to do: to offer a nuanced, if partial, picture of a largely undocumented and misunderstood social movement. I'm not convinced, though, that "getting the story straight" is, in itself, enough to justify writing (much less reading) this book. Freeganism still crops up occasionally—when, for example, a hacker with the anarchist group "Anonymous" was arrested and identified as a "freegan"³, or scattered mentions of "freeganism" in the Hollywood eco-terrorism drama, *The East*—but the deluge of media coverage of the phenomenon has slowed to a trickle. When I mentioned to Janet

¹ Of, if you ask Tim Barry, shopping at Fine Foods Market.

² (1978:246).

³ Clair and Lighty (2012).

that I was still working on my “freegan book,” she said that she worried that the moment “had passed.” She might be right. The proverbial payoff for analyzing freeganism, I am afraid, may not come from the light it shines on freeganism itself.

That said, freeganism does offer some insights into something bigger: the shape of contemporary anti-capitalism. For one thing, it suggests that anti-capitalist movements *exist*. This may not seem particularly profound, but with the word “capitalism” having almost completely disappeared from social movement studies, it needs to be made.⁴ If the persistence of anti-capitalism has been hard to see in the new millennium, it may be because movements like freeganism don’t look or sound like the anti-capitalists of yore. In their exhaustive chronicle of the ongoing dance between capitalists and anti-capitalists, Boltanski and Chiappello show that critiques of capitalism have transformed in tandem with changes in the moral justifications for capitalism itself.⁵ In the 1930s, labor movements and socialist parties launched a “social critique” that centered on the exploitation of labor and the growing inequality created by industrial capitalism. By 1960s, the focus had shifted to an “artistic critique” that lambasted the “inauthenticity,” “dehumanization,” “loss of autonomy,” and “absence of creativity” endemic to mass production and consumption.⁶

What I want to suggest is that freegan discourse is emblematic of a third kind of a critique—an ecological one.⁷ I mean this not just in the sense that environmental issues are front-and-center in current concerns about the shape of our economic system, but more broadly, in that

⁴ For the absence of discussions of anti-capitalist in contemporary sociology—even in analyses of the anti-globalization movement—see Hetland and Goodwin (2013).

⁵ (2005).

⁶ (2005:170).

⁷ I am heavily influenced by Burawoy’s (2010) assertion that “third wave” counter-movements to capitalist commodification will center on land and nature.

questions of scale, size, and sufficiency are now articulated as intractable problems of capitalism. During one “waving the banana” speech, Sasha cried out: “We are the one’s shouting ‘stop’. We represent the void in the system. It’s like a credit card being declined. We say, ‘No more.’” In a sense, while the “social critics” were primarily concerned with *how* things were being produced, and the “artistic critics” with *what* was being consumed and produced, “ecological critics” like Sasha were above all worried about *how much* is being produced, consumed, and wasted.

As such, shouting “stop” was a political program in-and-of-itself: a call for *less* work, *less* consumption, and *less* waste. This is a critique that is profoundly reflective of the present manifestation of capitalism as a whole. The ecological critique plays out on the ethical battleground chosen by capitalism itself, mirroring the centrality of discourses of “waste” in justifications for neo-liberal policies. As one freegan playfully asserted, “The real freeloaders and scavengers...are the people who...choose to compete and fight over it [the earth’s resources], rather than sharing their time and possessions with others in need.”⁸ The ecological critique also feeds off of widespread concern about the environment and our fears of impending scarcity—of jobs, of air, of public services, of free time.⁹

Of course, I don’t think freegan.info is original or unique in offering an ecological critique of capitalism. Quite the contrary: I believe freeganism is one manifestation of the general *zeitgeist* of contemporary anti-capitalism, as manifested in the cries of “enough” from the Zapatistas in Mexico or the graffiti declaring “the world is full” left behind after anti-

⁸ Anon (n.d.:70)

⁹ Arguably, a present-day concern for arresting the expansion of capitalism and preventing its encroachment into non-market spheres could be seen as a throw-back to the earliest anti-capitalist movements that sought to halt industrialization and the spread of the market (Aminzade 1981; Sewell 1980; Voss 1993). I am deeply indebted to Cihan Tugal for this insight.

globalization demonstrations. David Graeber, one of the most prominent theorists of present-day anarchism, for example, argues that modern capitalist societies are:

...built around the spectacular destruction of consumer goods. They are societies that imagine themselves as built on something they call ‘the economy’ which, in turn, is imagined as a nexus between ‘production’ and ‘consumption’, endlessly spitting out products and then destroying them again.¹⁰

As he highlights, many activists see production and consumption under capitalism as not just exploitative and dehumanizing, but also rather *pointless*. In this respect, the unveiling of waste fetishism is likely to continue to play a central role in anti-capitalist politics, as there is no better evidence that capitalism produces way too much than the fact that many things are disposed of without ever even passing into a consumer’s hands.

There’s another lesson about contemporary anti-capitalism that freeganism can teach us, one which again might seem obvious to activists themselves but which cuts against scholarly and public preconceptions. Sociologists still tend to think of social movement “politics” as being expressed through symbolic events like marches, demonstrations, or rallies, which are intended to dramatize some position and spur politicians to take action.¹¹ As a result, our understanding of “politics” still assumes that all political action is “an extension of electoral politics—however contentious.”¹²

Certainly, we could view events like trash tours through this lens: as an attempt to call waste to the attention of the public and media, with the hoped-for ultimate effect of getting politicians to pass legislation to address the problem. But this offers a one-dimensional view of

¹⁰ (2007:395).

¹¹ See Tilly (2008).

¹² Tarrow (2011:98).

freeganism, one which overlooks entirely how freegans *also* see themselves as achieving social change through “prefigurative” acts like building bikes or eating over-the-hill produce. Although the specifics of freegan practice may seem eccentric, I believe that they are responding to some much bigger challenges for contemporary activists: disillusionment with elected leaders, the absence of large-scale blueprints for alternative social arrangements, and the growing power of non-state actors like corporations or international financial institutions. Other studies affirm that freegans are not the only ones who are “disavowing politics” in their traditional form and turning towards more community-level, bottom-up, and direct strategies for achieving social change.¹³

Freeganism holds additional lessons for those who have *already* recognized the contemporary salience of prefigurative politics. Research on the “prefigurative” aspects of the anti-globalization movement or Occupy has typically focused the movements’ organizational structure, democratic decision-making, and use of information technology¹⁴—the latter focus emblematic of a more general interest in the use of social media in “e-mobilization.”¹⁵ Certainly, I could have talked about how consensus-based decision making, de-centralized “working groups,” and the web played into freeganism. I consciously decided not to, however, as I saw the real center of gravity of freegans’ prefigurative politics residing elsewhere.

To me, freeganism exposes the grittier, material side of prefigurative politics: the day-to-day processes through which activists are re-thinking how to provide for mundane necessities like food, shelter, clothing, and transportation.¹⁶ In a neo-liberal era where cuts to social services,

¹³ For a less radical manifestation of this shift, see Bennett (2013).

¹⁴ (Juris 2008; Langman 2005; Sbicca and Perdue 2013).

¹⁵ (see Earl and Kimport 2011).

¹⁶ A handful of studies also note the role of physical objects—from flags to giant puppets—in social movements (Glass 2010; Graeber 2007; HersHKovitz 1993; Zhao 1998), although such discussions are rare.

widespread unemployment, and criminalization of homeless have put certain populations' very survival into question, it's unsurprising that prefigurative movements are addressing not just how to govern global financial capital, but also how to eat, sleep, and stay warm.

If examining freeganism has analytic value for scholars, it also has strategic value for activists. The “fetish of waste” and “ex-commodities” are not just ideas intended to meld into the academic rhetorical mush: they each point to how freegans' politics could be further developed and spread. As I have suggested, unveiling the fetish of waste—in simplest terms, pointing out that useful things are going into the garbage—is a simple yet powerful way to undermine some of the foundational justifications of capitalism. It doesn't require evoking complex Marxist concepts like the labor theory of value or alienation. It draws, instead, on the nearly universally shared belief that “waste” is a bad thing. Similarly, “ex-commodities” have embedded within them their own political possibilities, insofar as they can enable activists to experiment with how to arrange a post-capitalist economy without moving to the countryside, and by freeing up time for political action that would otherwise be spent on wage-labor. Of course, each of these openings for challenging capitalism have to be defended. Future struggles will doubtlessly have to protect ex-commodities from being (literally) fenced off and counter the fetishistic mythos that suggests all waste comes from distortions in the market imposed by governments or consumers.

All of that said, even as I write this, I'm still not entirely convinced that the insights freeganism gives us into contemporary anti-capitalist politics is *quite* enough to justify the consideration I'm giving it. So I'll offer one other place to look for the enduring significance of freeganism. When I first began my research in 2007, it was safe to say that, when it came to food waste, the freegans were a voice in the wilderness. As of 2009, the U.S. Department of

Agriculture admitted that studying food waste was “not a high priority”¹⁷ and, in 2011, that same institution could confidently state, “Currently, in the United States, there is no widespread or visible political or social momentum to reduce food loss and waste.”¹⁸

I’m not sure they would say that any more.¹⁹ In 2013, the USDA and Environmental Protection Association launched a “Food Waste Recovery” challenge, to which 210 organizations—ranging from universities to professional sports teams and one petroleum-refining company—have signed on. This national initiative grew out of a multiplicity of grassroots initiatives, ranging from smartphone apps for sharing leftovers to state-level bans on landfilling organic waste. If anything, though, the U.S. is a laggard. The European Commission dubbed 2014 the “European Year Against Food Waste,” the United Nations recently unveiled a “Think.Eat.Save” campaign, a town in Belgium required supermarkets to donate excess food, and France introduced a “National Pact Against Food Waste.” Even Pope Francis has jumped on the bandwagon, tweeting, “Consumerism has accustomed us to waste. But throwing food away is like stealing it from the poor and hungry.”²⁰

In some ways, this surge in interest in food waste seems like a logical response to an objective problem. Somewhere between 12 and 15% of humanity’s total water consumption and 23% of its farmland is used to grow food that no one eats.²¹ If “food waste” declared itself an independent nation, its yearly greenhouse-gas emissions would be third, behind the United States

¹⁷ Bloom (2010:27).

¹⁸ Buzby et al. (2011:508).

¹⁹ Actually, I am sure. The authors of the 2011 USDA report stating that there was “no...momentum to reduce food loss and waste” returned three years later to declare that “Food loss (and particularly the food waste component) is becoming an increasingly important topic both domestically and internationally” (Buzby et al. 2014:iii).

²⁰ (Breyer 2013).

²¹ Kummu et al. (2012:485).

and China.²² Global food prices hit an all-time high in 2012, pushing millions of people into a form of hunger euphemistically dubbed “food insecurity.”²³ With the human population expected to crest nine billion by 2050, reducing food waste seems like a straightforward way to meet growing need and alleviate hunger without exacerbating the grisly environmental toll wreaked by modern agriculture.²⁴

But “social problems” do not just emerge on the public stage under their own momentum: it takes movements, activists, and ideological entrepreneurs to put them there.²⁵ So where does freeganism fit into the picture? In early 2014, I attended a conference put on by “GreenCook,” an EU-funded collaboration between governments, businesses, and non-profits centered on reducing food waste. The keynote speaker was Tristram Stuart, a British public-intellectual who, by his own narrative, first became interested in food waste through “skip dipping” in London.²⁶ He opened his remarks by asking, “Who here has ever been dumpster diving?” My hand and that of my partner shot up: the other 250 people—mostly government functionaries, corporate sustainability officers, and high-level NGO employees—looked at us quizzically. Yet when I pulled Stuart aside afterward, he told me:

By taking journalists round the back of supermarkets, showing them what was there, and serving them dinner based on it, and being able to very articulately talk about how this fit into a global problem—the amount of media that generated certainly sparked a lot of

²² FAO (2013).

²³ Lorenzetti (2013).

²⁴ By one calculation, current avoidable global food waste is enough to feed 1.9 billion people 2,100 kcal per capita per day (Kummu et al. 2012:485).

²⁵ See Blumer (1971).

²⁶ Notably, for Stuart, “freeganism” meant “the consumption of free discarded food” (2009:5), indicating that the term never had the same general anti-capitalist connotations in the U.K. as in the U.S.

interest on the part of policymakers and companies...I absolutely think freeganism was *the* original instigator of this new wave of global action on food waste.²⁷

Drawing a direct link between a single social movement and a particular social response is notoriously challenging,²⁸ and becomes even more so when we consider the multiplicity of different actors making simultaneous demands on our food system. What we *do* know is that when movements have an impact, it tends to be through amplifying pre-existing currents in public opinion and politicizing concerns previously left out of the political arena.²⁹ Once issues like food waste move from the margins to the mainstream, though, they quickly spiral out of movements' control.³⁰ So while I feel comfortable stating that there is probably some connection between the *hundreds* of media stories on freegan.info in virtually every major news outlet in the United States and food waste's subsequent entrance onto the public stage, contemporary initiatives against food waste present the issue in ways that freegans like Adam would doubtlessly find alien.

Indeed, some contemporary advocates have insisted that food waste is absolutely *not* a political issue.³¹ Instead, according to Stuart, "Reducing food waste...is uncontroversial [and] relatively painless and easy."³² His American counterpart, Jonathan Bloom, writes that solving food waste is a "triple bottom line" solution that benefits consumers, businesses, and the environment, adding that "By trimming our waste and recovering the low-hanging fruit (literally

²⁷ Evans et al. (2012) also conclude that freeganism, alongside the 2008 economic crisis, government anti-waste policies, and the broader growth of the environmental movement, led to recent initiatives to combat food waste.

²⁸ (Amenta and Young 1999; Olzak and Soule 2009; Schurman and Munro 2010).

²⁹ Agnone (2007).

³⁰ Rojas (2007).

³¹ Bloom (2013).

³² Stuart (2009:294).

and figuratively!), we can help feed hungry Americans, bolster our economy, combat global warming, and make our society that much more ethical.”³³ All that is needed, cheers another report, is “raising awareness of the ‘hidden’ costs” of waste, at which point food businesses will grab at the profits they are currently throwing away.³⁴

There’s an element of common sense about these claims. After all, who is *for* food waste? Nonetheless, although many freegans told me they were encouraged by this growing interest in food waste—Wendy tells virtually everyone to read Stuart’s *Waste*—freeganism itself suggests some of the limits of these efforts as currently posed.

While businesses, institutions, and governments are occasional targets of food waste prevention campaigns, consumer practices, attitudes, and habits have been the overwhelming focus.³⁵ The British Environmental Secretary pointed his finger at a “culture of perfection” as the culprit for wastage.³⁶ Speaking against a cultural “paradigm” that enables food waste, the United Nation’s “Think.Eat.Save” website assures us that “with relative ease and a few simple changes to our habits, we can significantly shift this paradigm.”³⁷ Much like campaigns that propose shorter showers and fluorescent light bulbs as a way to arrest climate change, a significant proportion of the concern about food waste is being channeled towards lists of strategies—like freezing leftovers, making a shopping list, or cutting out the rotten parts of produce—that begin

³³ (2010:11, 28).

³⁴ Mena et al. (2011:648).

³⁵ See (Evans et al. 2012:431; Gille 2012:41).

³⁶ Hope (2012).

³⁷ (Think.Eat.Save 2013).

and end at the individual level.³⁸ This is, I would argue, a continuation of a long trend in the politics of waste: namely, displacing blame for waste from producers onto consumers.

But by targeting consumers, activists are also embracing a particular theory of social change which this book has, implicitly, sought to evaluate. Even those who, like Stuart, acknowledge the need for structural transformation in our food system nonetheless see the key change-makers as consumers. As he writes, “Consumer power is the new face of democracy...we vote every day with our money, and we can use it to bring about change, often much more rapidly than legislation can ever achieve.”³⁹

Campaigners concerned with over-consumption often quote George W. Bush’s post-9/11 admonition for Americans to “do your business...[and] get down to Disney World” as exhibit-A for the extent to which “good citizenship” has become conflated with “shopping.” Yet, in a sense, those who advocate ethical consumption—including those urging shoppers to “vote with our money” for stores and suppliers that minimize waste—share the same limited horizon of citizenship. Whether the goal is to change the system or keep it as it is, the purest form of political participation still takes place at the cash register. This is, needless to say, a withered conception of “democracy”: after all, if dollars are the new votes, do people with more dollars get more votes?

Even if we get over these theoretical concerns, there are good reasons to doubt that changes to consumer practices—either in the kitchen or the supermarket aisle—will have much

³⁸ Quested (2013:45) list a host of individual strategies for reducing waste: planning meals in advance, checking levels of food in cupboards before shopping, making a shopping list, using appropriate storage, using the freezer to extend food shelf life, better portioning of rice and pasta, using up leftovers, and using date-labels on food. I certainly wouldn’t discourage anyone from engaging in these practices, but I also wouldn’t lie and say I think they are likely to change anything.

³⁹ Stuart (2009:206).

of an impact. As the freegans themselves discovered, the idea of “consumer power” rests on believing the *rhetoric* of capitalism—that is to say, remaining under the spell of fetishism—while ignoring how it actually works. It assumes a relatively neat correlation between what consumers want and what actually gets produced, a relationship that waste itself suggests is not so simple. If, as Adam suggested, going vegan just means more chickens wind up in the supermarket bin, it seems equally plausible that going “zero waste” means more of *everything* in that same receptacle. Recent studies have lauded a 21% decrease in food waste in British households⁴⁰—partly due to the economic downturn, partly due to increased awareness—but it’s unclear whether households wasting less means less waste in aggregate, or simply that waste is happening higher up in the food chain as commodities that get produced fail to find buyers.

Contemporary initiatives against food waste fundamentally fail to grapple with the two processes that create ex-commodities in the first place: overproduction and commodification. In the half-century after World War II, global population grew 110% but food production—fuelled by synthetic fertilizers, mechanization, and genetic modification—grew 174%.⁴¹ The total global food supply is 4,600 kcal per person per day—much of which is inefficiently fed to animals, some of which gets eaten, and the rest of which gets wasted.⁴² To me, it seems obvious that, in order to reduce food waste, we will eventually have to reduce production of food (or find uses for food other than eating it, which I’ll discuss below).

⁴⁰ (Quested, Ingle, and Parry 2013).

⁴¹ Otero (2008).

⁴² Stuart (2009:190). This is not to say that we produce enough of the *right* amounts of food, though. Nestle (2002:130) claims that the U.S. does not grow enough fruits and vegetables to provide five servings a day for the entire population, although it’s not clear if waste factors into her calculations.

Yet the word “less” does not exist in the vocabulary of capitalism, nor does it seem to have found a place in the rhetoric of most food waste campaigners.⁴³ To suggest that we should produce less is politically verboten, since it is, in effect, a demand that everyone in the food chain should make less money and turn a smaller profit. Stuart writes that “sorting out the food waste problem would be...good for business,” adding that, “where waste has been cut, profit margins consistently soar.”⁴⁴ This is a silly claim. Food corporations employ thousands of analysts, consultants, and economists whose job it is to find the most profitable conceivable business model. If it were really so easy to raise profits through eliminating waste, wouldn’t stores already be doing it? As none other than the U.S. Comptroller General concluded in an investigation into waste written nearly four decades ago, “In the course of preparing this report, no material has been found that would indicate that opportunities were knowingly overlooked by business owners to conserve food at an acceptable cost. The profit motive should dictate against such loss.”⁴⁵ The issue becomes even more obdurate when we move from the level of the individual firm to the entire food sector. Surely not *every* company can make more money by reducing waste. Indeed, as Karl Marx and Sasha are quick to remind us, reducing waste as a whole actually shrinks the total profit-pie sliced between companies in a given industry.

We can see the intractable barriers overproduction presents to reducing waste by narrowing our gaze to one of the most-vaunted solutions to food waste: charitable donations. Once again, the solution seems simple: there are hungry people, there is excess food, and there

⁴³ The mission statement of the USDA, for example, continues to include “to promote agriculture production,” even as it participates in initiatives to reduce food waste.

⁴⁴ Stuart (2009:xx)

⁴⁵ (1977:44)

are food banks that are not currently keeping pace with demand.⁴⁶ Of course, the problems with addressing hunger through private charity—nutritional inadequacy, unstable supplies, inaccessibility, and the indignity of “means testing” and religious requirements—are well-documented,⁴⁷ which is part of why groups like Food Not Bombs deliberately distance themselves from other emergency food providers. Even more perniciously, in the United States, food banks have smoothed the transition from a public system where poor people were given money to buy food of their choice to a private one in which the poor get whatever surplus the food system has on offer at a particular moment. Increasing donations only exacerbates this trend: in fact, in the most recent farm bill, billions in cut backs to food stamps were paired with millions for community food rescue.

Freegans themselves were ambivalent towards charitable groups like City Harvest (which, it should be noted, has publicly criticized freegan.info). For one thing, freegans noted that even stores that claimed to donate food continued to ex-commodify it in enormous quantities. As Janet observed:

It’s lip service to say ‘We don’t throw out.’ We’ve had stores we go to regularly that say to the cameras, ‘We don’t throw out our food, we give to City Harvest’...It’s good what they’re [City Harvest] doing, but it’s just literally not enough. There’s still such quantities of waste. And, meanwhile, I think it placates the companies and the public.

Marie, who interned with City Harvest one summer, noted how the organization actually celebrated those stores whose business models relied on overabundance and excess:

⁴⁶ See Gentilini (2013).

⁴⁷ (Henderson 2004; Midgley 2013; Poppendieck 1999; Tarasuk and Eakin 2005).

City Harvest doesn't even see the problem. It's just something normal that there is waste.

We were talking about one of our suppliers, and they said, 'They're great, they give us fifty bags of bread.' And I asked them if that's changed over time, and they said, 'No, they're very reliable, it's always been fifty bags.' There's no attempt to change the situation at all. There's no questioning of capitalism, of waste, or of the need for free food in the first place.

In short, while food banks may be very good at providing cover and legitimacy for corporate actors, they are less good at systematically reducing waste and feeding people .

In the fall of 2013, I worked packing emergency food boxes at a food bank in my hometown. Each day, our truck would come from back from local Safeways and Wal-Marts with pallets and pallets of meat, produce, and—above all—baked goods. We would first weigh the donations—the figure would be used to calculate the stores' tax deduction—and only then sort out the massive amount of rotting, spoiled, or otherwise inedible food that they had given us.⁴⁸ Even when that task was done, though, there was still far too much. A modern-day Marie Antoinette would be proud: clients would leave our food bank teetering under piles of birthday cakes and donuts, yet by the end of the week, we still often threw out thousands of muffins, pastries, and loaves of edible bread.⁴⁹ No doubt, however unhealthy, the food helped alleviate hunger. But it also helped stores perpetuate the profitable overproduction of baked goods, which I detailed in Chapter 4.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Similarly, stores appeared to use East Bay Food Not Bombs as a waste-disposal service, taking the tax write-off *and* saving on disposal fees by giving the group obviously unusable food.

⁴⁹ This is consistent with Bloom (2010:49), who quotes one food bank manager saying she throws out 50% of donations.

⁵⁰ The whole situation at the food bank was actually even more perverted than I've let on. Much of the leftovers from our food bank were picked up for free by a for-profit wildlife park. So, to

Partly, we couldn't distribute all that was donated to us because we lacked the infrastructure and labor. But partly, some donations went to waste because there was literally no one who wanted them: the ratio of hungry-people-to-cake was way, way off. Now, imagine for an instant, that stores, manufacturers, distributors, and producers decided to donate *all* of their surplus food. Given that the U.S. wastes a number of calories equivalent to the nutritional deficit of the *entire world*, it follows that the needs of the hungry in the U.S. would quickly be met. So where would the rest of that food go?

It's a meaningless thought experiment, because there's no way that the 40% of U.S. food production currently going to waste could be redistributed for free. For one thing, it would challenge the most basic social contract of capitalism: that the main way to get food, which is a commodity, is for workers to sell ("commodify") their labor power. Break this rather uneven bargain, and the entire profit-driven food system—or, some might suggest, the entire capitalist system—will collapse because people would have little reason to work in jobs that they find meaningless and unrewarding.⁵¹ It follows that charity has an obvious upper bound: as soon as potential *customers*, as opposed to heavily stigmatized and racialized populations that are

summarize: a for-profit company received a tax-break for dumping its waste on a non-profit, which paid workers to sort out the edible from the inedible, the latter of which then went to a for-profit entity. Supermarkets received a deduction for feeding animals at a bear-amusement park.

⁵¹ Przeworski (1991:32) conducts just such a thought experiment: "Suppose that, instead of wasting the already produced food, we would distribute it to the poor. Then the price of food would fall, farmers would be getting a lower rate of return, and they would produce less. Moreover, some people who produce food for themselves would find it more profitable to do something else and to get free food. Or suppose that we pay farmers to produce, support farm prices out of taxes, and distribute food to the poor. But then the rates of return would fall throughout the economy, and the output of other commodities would decline. In fact, we do some of both, out of compassion or other motivations. But under capitalism, we do it at the cost of reducing output below its potential level."

presumed unable to buy food anyway, began getting food for free, the spigots of ex-commodities would be switched off and the surplus would once again go into a (locked) dumpster.⁵²

As the limitations of food banking and donations make clear, efforts to reduce food waste ultimately run up against the commodity logic on which capitalism depends—namely that goods are distributed through the market. This same basic imperative presents a roadblock for some of the other hopes of food waste campaigners. Stuart, for example, argues that if the rich world stopped wasting food, it would reduce pressures on food supply, lower prices, and increase access to food among the world's poor.

I'll grant that it's certainly more plausible than the idea of directly redistributing the world's surplus food to the hungry. Yet it is still naïve to the way markets actually work. So long as food is a commodity, it will go to the highest bidder, and recently, the highest bidders for food have had remarkably little interest in actually eating it. The world food crisis of 2007 and 2008 was partly spurred by financial speculation and a growing demand for bio-fuels made from food crops.⁵³ Many of these same entities have started to see the value of food *waste* in its capacity to serve as fuel, not food. In fact, in Europe, efforts to reduce food waste have overwhelmingly focused on “diversion”—that is, channeling food waste towards anaerobic digesters, fertilizer, or composters.⁵⁴ Past experience with waste-to-energy incinerators shows that when we create demands for “waste,” perverse things happen: namely, municipalities become obligated through “put-or-pay” contracts to produce a certain amount of waste, stunting any impetus to reduce

⁵² In fact, some chain restaurants already regard donations as a potential loss of profit and thus discard food rather than donate it (Griffin et al. 2009:79).

⁵³ (Borras and Franco 2012; Hollander 2010; McMichael 2012).

⁵⁴ (Bulkeley and Gregson 2009; Krzywoszynska 2012; O'Brien 2012).

waste in the first place.⁵⁵ This is the case even though the evidence is unequivocal: *reducing* food waste is far more environmentally beneficial than diverting it.⁵⁶ New York City recently began to instigate municipal composting, and, as Janet observed one trash tour:

Here at this final stop we find compost, in compost bins, which might be considered positive, except that when we look at it, we notice that we're still rescuing tons of good food from this so-called 'compost', before it's anywhere close to being inedible; it's actually perfectly good, perfectly useable.

Far from challenging the commodification of food, waste-to-energy and other contemporary schemes actually deepen it. And whether or not we see anaerobic digestion or composting as a good thing, it certainly doesn't put more food in the mouths of the world's hungry. In short, unless we start thinking seriously about the closely intertwined issues of overproduction and commodification—endemic to capitalism, but put on steroids by neo-liberalism—it is hard to see real reductions in food waste coming any time soon.

Jonathan Bloom predicts reducing food waste will soon become as common place as recycling; it's worth drawing the comparison further to explore the limits of environmental reform within the confines of capitalism. On one level, recycling is a huge success story that food waste reduction could emulate. It is widely reported that more Americans now recycle than vote (as good an indication of the form citizenship takes in neo-liberal America as ever there was one). Recycling rates have climbed steadily from 8% of municipal solid waste in 1990 to 33%,

⁵⁵ (Royte 2005:81). As Gille (2008:170) sagely observes, “profit-oriented incineration does not so much eliminate wastes as produces them.”

⁵⁶ (T. E. Quested et al. 2013:43; Stuart 2009).

and the recycling industry now employs 1.1 million people.⁵⁷ The overall positive impacts of recycling, however, are dubious. Much of the export of materials for recycling is actually “sham recycling” with little ecological value intended to avoid government regulations.⁵⁸ In total, the actual reductions in resource and energy use from recycling are minimal.⁵⁹

Instead, the chief impact of recycling has been to assuage ecological guilt, giving us a sense that production and consumption can continue to grow so long as we put our discards in the right bin. In aggregate, then, recycling has “functioned...to divert public attention away from stronger reforms”⁶⁰ that would address the origins of waste in overproduction. Perhaps, then, food waste initiatives are a form of what Samantha MacBride, criticizing contemporary recycling, calls “busyness”: “a fulfilling sense of work and achievement that often brings positive side-effects but fails to reach the central effect.”⁶¹

In my fears about the ultimate outcomes of food waste campaigns, I am joined by Stuart himself, who announced at the conference I attended:

Politicians and corporations are using food waste as a ‘get out’ clause from doing anything else. They’re donating food to the local food bank, as if that’s all they have to do to make their food supply chains more sustainable. There is a hell of a lot wrong with our food system, and the heaps of food we see in bins, on farms, outside supermarkets, is a symptom of that. But it’s not the only problem.

⁵⁷ (MacBride 2012:8), although direct analyses of waste streams suggest that this figure—which relies on extrapolated numbers—greatly overstates the diversion rate (Van Haaren, Themelis, and Goldstein 2010).

⁵⁸ (Ali 2002; Pellow 2007).

⁵⁹ (MacBride 2012).

⁶⁰ (Rogers 2005:158). One study, for example, found that composting food made respondents feel as though they were “doing their bit” and thus did not need to engage in further environmental action (Metcalf et al. 2012).

⁶¹ (2012:6).

As I noted in the introduction, there are two sides to the tomato's story. Certainly, eating that tomato rather than wasting it would have been a good thing. But it wouldn't magically improve the working conditions of the Mexican laborers, pull greenhouses gases from the air, or put water back into the aquifers. The bait freegans used to get the public's attention was waste, yes, but their message concerned the system as a whole and, in this, they were spot on.

And it's not just the food system, of course. For reasons of space and because food really *was* the focus of freegan.info's politics, I've left underdeveloped discussions of the hidden problems behind the production of other commodities under capitalism. Considering them reveals another problem with a narrow fixation on food waste. For example, if *all* we cared about was reducing food, additional packaging might help, and, indeed, the packaging industry has enthusiastically leapt on the food-waste-reduction bandwagon, despite its dubious ecological record.⁶²

We thus return to the problem that tied freegans in knots: if we are to withdraw our dollars from wasteful or unethical food production, where exactly should we put them? Bloom writes that, if American consumers stopped wasting food, they could "save" \$2,200 a year.⁶³ But "saving" money on food is just a way of saying the average family could have \$2,200 to spend on something else.⁶⁴ And what, exactly, are they supposed to spend it on? iPhones? Clothes? The former can be traced to factories where workers commit suicide in horrendous numbers and mines in warzones where children are worked to death; the latter to factories in Bangladesh

⁶² Downham (2013).

⁶³ (2010:24). The \$2,200 is probably too high: Buzby et al. (2014:iii) peg consumer losses at \$371 a year.

⁶⁴ The extent to which "thrift" in one area of the household economy is used to support profligacy in another is noted by Cappellini and Parsons (2012:132) and Quested et al. (2013:47). This is one manifestation of the "Jevon's Paradox," which asserts that greater efficiency actually *increases* overall resource use (2010).

where the lack of even basic safety precautions can lead to thousands of deaths. And, of course, both clothes and cell-phones get thrown out in egregious quantities too. As freegans taught me, trying to figure how to consume one thing ethically within an unethical system is a fruitless endeavor.

Under capitalism, production, consumption, and waste are all bound together as part of a single process. You can't remove one link in the chain—like “waste”—without the whole thing falling apart. Throughout this book, I've shown how, for freegans, “waste” isn't really “waste” at all—it's actually quite useful. Yet, in a sense, freegans show that “waste” isn't “waste” for capitalists either. When somebody buys something and then throws it out, the money they pay still serves to keep the economic machine running. Waste means economic growth. Waste means jobs—and not just for garbage men. Little wonder that the output of trash has an astonishingly close correlation with the health of the U.S. economy.⁶⁵ Owing to her ignorance of the standard leftist jargon, Janet rarely got credit for her intellectual contributions to freegan.info, but on the final trash tour I attended—a poorly attended, dispiriting event—she poignantly commented: “The sad thing is, the better our economy, the more our economy is being boosted, the worse is our ecology. They're just at odds with each other.”

This might seem like an unrelentingly pessimistic conclusion. Books on waste are, after all, supposed to end with a list of policy prescriptions or everyday actions we can take to solve this problem *today*. Actually, I think that the perspective that I am offering—drawn from freegans themselves—is a liberating one. The structural approach to waste I have elaborated in this book allows us to make sense of an apparent paradox: everyone wants to eliminate waste, yet the system as a whole is massively wasteful. In fact, everyone really *does* have an incentive

⁶⁵ Plumer (2012).

to be, as an individual, thrifty. Consumers are better off if they don't throw out their leftovers; stores are better off if they optimize the supply chain. But the consumer *also* benefits in a way when the store throws out all but the best vegetables, and the store benefits when the consumer buys more than he or she needs. Our system as a whole thrives on waste just as it thrives on other things that we, as individuals, might not like, like financial speculation or environmental degradation.

In short, the understanding of waste freeganism inspires recognizes that there is little point in blaming consumers—or even “capitalists” themselves. As Marx himself noted, “Looking at these things as a whole, it is evident that this does not depend on the will, either good or bad, of the individual capitalist. Under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him.”⁶⁶ Waste does not come from bad intentions; it comes from logical responses to the demands of a capitalist system. Unfortunately, it follows that *good* intentions, absent structural change, aren't likely to change anything.

I don't want to end with the cheap trope that only revolution can save us. The fact that “capitalism” has not everywhere and always been wasteful speaks to the potential for reform. But even “reform” of capitalism must, in a sense, be anti-capitalist, insofar as it reins in (if not overthrows) the imperatives of endless growth and commodification. And, I want to note, reform involves trade offs. I often hear food waste campaigners saying that we “don't value food,” and that what we *don't* value is at the root of the problem. Certainly, freeganism tells us a lot about what we don't value as a society: the workers, animals, and natural resources that make our food, for a start. But it also tells us a great deal about what we *do* value. We don't just value “money,”

⁶⁶ Marx (1976:381).

as the polemicists might have it. We also value convenience, abundance, aesthetics, choice—all worthy in and of themselves, but all dependent upon waste. We may very well be able to give up waste; it's just that we might have to discard these values along with it.

I once asked Sasha what he would like to see in a book about freeganism. I expected him to suggest that I make sure to have a thorough reading of Marx, an accurate rendering of freegan.info's internal dynamics, or a thorough exegesis of the history of waste in anarchist movements. Instead, he told me, "What I'd like to see is an absence of angst." As he elaborated:

Freeganism in some ways sutures the void of overproduction and under-privilege that our society affords to its people. The community that is enabled by that suture, being one of integrity and friendship and sharing, that is built on mutual aid and conviviality, rather than this angsty feeling of unwilling engagement with a capitalist state...for me, it was like a shaft of life in a solitary confinement cell, because it showed me that there was an escape from what seemed like a hopeless situation.

Freeganism is not going to overthrow capitalism. It may not even have much of an impact where it is most needed, in contemporary debates on food and waste. We tend to judge movements by whether they accomplish what they set out to do: in this, freeganism is a resounding failure. But, at least for a short time, freeganism gave a sense of possibility and meaning to a small band of hopeful activists in New York City. That, to me, hardly seems like a waste.

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