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Reused Refuse: Freeganism and the Shifting Hegemonies of Consumption and Waste

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Reused Refuse: Freeganism and the Shifting Hegemonies of Consumption and Waste

Jamie Corliss

Abstract:

Freeganism is a counter-culture practice, lifestyle, and philosophy that resists the waste and exploitation inherent to capitalism. By examining freegan practices and philosophies, specifically dumpster diving, this project reveals how these actions help make apparent and shift dominant ideologies about waste and consumption by re-injecting value into wasted items. The project argues that the waste that freegans live on has the semiotic power to shift dominant attitudes about waste and gives freegans the means to survive with limited participation in the economy, but this waste is a byproduct of capitalist production, not a cause of it. Freegans are conceptually paving the way for a post-capitalist way of living by eroding hegemonic notions of waste and profit, but they fail to target the root of capitalist production.

Keywords: freeganism, dumpster diving, capitalism, waste, environmentalism, counter-culture
For most people, shopping and disposing of waste are frequent, ordinary activities that hardly necessitate any amount of thought. For most people too, buying and wasting are simply unavoidable actions, necessary habits for survival, but a group of activists called freegans have renounced this notion. For freegans, the practices of consuming and wasting require critical examination. Such a critical look reveals some very unpleasant things about the capitalist economy, the wellbeing of humans, and the future of the earth. Freegans say, We view the commodities being marketed to us and see them for what they are — misery and suffering with a clean coat of paint. For instance, a pair of Nike shoes is a teenage sweatshop worker who knows that standing up for basic dignity, challenging the toil and cruelty and starvation, will mean being fired into an even greater starvation and hardship [...] The sickness is as old as the idea that anything on this Earth can be owned by one rather than shared by many, as old as the idea that living beings and sections of the Earth can be owned at all. We want to tear down the barbed wire of this system’s laws, the stone edifices of its economic precepts, and to break the chains of its ideologies. (“Freegan Visions”). Despite the estimated several thousand freegans roaming the back alleys and dumps of cities and towns in the US, the term freeganism has little recognition outside of subculture and counterculture groups. Freeganism has its origins in the better-known practice and philosophy of veganism, the movement that boycotts the consumption of animal products of any kind. By eschewing animal products, vegans refuse to support the exploitation of animals for human purposes. Many freegans are vegans, but freegans find that it is not enough merely to protest animal exploitation. For freegans, conscientious living involves boycotting all products that exploit any person or animal at any time during
the production or sale of the product. In the current structure of capitalist production and consumption, nearly every product will in some way result in the exploitation of some human or some animal and so,

[a]s workers and potential consumers, we [freegans] view participation in this economy as a form of complicity in practices like sweatshop labor, rainforest destruction, and factory farming [...] instead of avoiding the purchase of products from one bad company only to support another, we avoid buying anything to the greatest degree we are able. (freegan.info, "About")

A complete avoidance of purchasing anything and the targeting of capitalism as the cause of disillusionment, inequality, and destruction are the traits that make this a radical movement. Freegans not only boycott the current system, but also conceptualize a different and better world based on existing harmoniously with nature and practicing egalitarianism in all areas of life. Freegans carry out these philosophies by subsisting mainly off of food and items scavenged from dumpsters and establishing communities for sharing and trading these items. Without the need to buy most things, freegans often do not work or work limited hours. They then use their extra time to be involved in other social justice, environmental, or political movements, expanding freeganism's reach to incorporate many other radical philosophies and practices.

Freegans conceptually pave the way for a post-capitalist way of living by eroding hegemonic notions of waste and profit, but they are simultaneously missing the actual mode of production. The waste that freegans live on provides them a semiotic tool for shifting dominant attitudes about waste and the means to survive with limited participation in the economy, but this waste is a byproduct of capitalist production, not a
cause of it. Freegans profess both a radical anger towards the capitalist mode of production that produces waste and exploitation and at the same time envision a future that draws from a nostalgic notion of the past where humans coexisted with nature. The act of dumpster diving or, as freegans call it, "urban scavenging," parallels the historical practice of humans gathering their own food and points out how capitalism has created a detrimental intermediary process between food production and consumption. While freegans strive for a post-capitalist society that is a return to this idyllic lifestyle, during this capitalist era, they fail to escape capitalism and its ideologies entirely. Though they have not yet escaped, freegans existence within capitalism allows them the strategic position to resist capitalist ideologies by redefining and revaluing waste.

From vegan to freegan

Freeganism is a counter-cultural practice, lifestyle, and philosophy that seeks to resist the waste and exploitation inherent in capitalism. The movement has close ties to the environmental and anarchist movements, and is particularly against the ideologies of consumerism. The core belief of freeganism is the conviction that capitalism is the cause of human and animal exploitation, environmental degradation, extreme waste, and the increasing disillusionment and unhappiness of many people. In response to this, freegans employ a number of alternative living strategies, including "waste reclamation" or dumpster diving, "eco-friendly transportation," do-it-yourself (DIY) practices, and "rent-free housing." These particular practices are used because

[f]reegans 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. (freegan.info, “Philosophy”)

Warren Oakes, drummer from the punk band Against Me! is credited with writing the original freegan manifesto first published in an anarchist zine in 2000. Oakes summarizes the main problems freegans have with capitalism and provides a critique of freeganism’s precursor, veganism\(^1\), saying,

Besides the concern that veganism as an ethic for eating stops short, it is also still a very high impact lifestyle. 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. (Oakes)

He goes on to argue that to truly challenge capitalism, one must boycott the entire system of capitalism by never purchasing any commodities. He outlines a number of ideas for surviving without buying, which includes tips for dumpster diving, eating scraps off plates in restaurants, shop lifting (not a practice advocated by all freegans), making an urban garden or solar oven, home brewing beer, alternative transportation, squatting, and forming free stores or marketplaces for trading. Oakes concludes the document thus:

\(^1\) Veganism itself emerged as a critical response to vegetarianism. The term vegan was created using the first and last parts of the word vegetarian and is meant to symbolize “the beginning and end of vegetarian.” The vegan movement took a more radical and complete approach to protesting the exploitation of animals and promoting their rights (“Veganism”).
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! (Oakes)

It is hard to gauge when the term freegan actually began to be regularly used, but the word freeganism itself is a direct adaptation of the term veganism, which Oakes and other freegans criticize. Freegan.info describes the meaning behind their name:

The word freegan is compounded from “free” and “vegan”. Vegans are people who avoid products from animal sources or products tested on animals in an effort to avoid harming animals. Freegans take this a step further by recognizing that in a complex, industrial, mass-production economy driven by profit, abuses of humans, animals, and the earth abound at all levels of production (from acquisition to raw materials to production to transportation) and in just about every product we buy.

(Freegan.info "What is a Freegan?")

Freegans criticize veganism, but freeganism did grow from the movement and some freegans do practice veganism as well. The two movements are particularly connected by their goal of reducing animal exploitation. However, for freegans reducing waste is the more important goal and so many freegan vegans will eat animal products from dumpsters with the idea that, since the animal has already been killed, it is better for the animal not to have died or suffered in vain.

Though it is the radical comprehensive philosophy and practices of freegans that differentiates them from other counter-capitalist movements, dumpster diving is arguably
the central practice of freeganism. Unlike other groups of dumpster divers or alternative food countercultures, freegan dumpster diving occurs in a context of notions of resistance and escape from the exploitation inherent to capitalism. It is freeganism’s relationship to waste, with these philosophies in mind, that makes it both a successful and unsuccessful movement against capitalism. What is essential to freeganism is the ‘rescuing’ of food from ‘waste’ status, an act that provides them the semiotic power to shape and resist meanings that cause excessive waste.

Freegans are not the only people on the streets rummaging around in dumpsters. There is a large population of homeless, poor, and frugal people who recognize the use-value of many objects that are thrown away. For some, dumpster diving can even be a profitable endeavor since metal scraps, discarded appliances, and household fixtures can be sold to recycling or resale companies. What differentiates freegans from these other street scavengers is the fact that freegans most often come from a privileged position from which they choose to dumpster dive to further their cause of resistance, while most other divers turn to the trash because they have no other choice.

This paper focuses on a large group of freegans in New York City that organize around the website freegan.info. This website was started in 2003 to provide information about freeganism and create a space for freegans to establish and spread their ideas. In 2005, freegan.info users started a weekly calendar of freegan events in the city to promote the movement, gain new members, and introduce them to dumpster diving. The website provides an abundance of information about freegan philosophy and practices, and has numerous links to informational sources on waste, and resources for finding or creating freegan groups. Freegan.info does not claim to be an official website of freeganism, but it is
the largest and most organized source of information on freeganism. Freegans have a fairly large online presence and local groups use sites such as Facebook and Meetup.com to discuss ideas and practices, set up market places, and organize group dumpster dives. Many freegans also participate and unite around Food Not Bombs, an organization that distributes dumpstered food to the homeless and hungry.

There are no official estimates on how many dumpster divers consider themselves freegan, but based on observation of freegans' online presence, it is thought that most freegans are concentrated in New York City and they are predominantly educated, middle class, and white. On the website Meetup.com, the Dumpster Dive group in NYC has more than 2000 members. Freeganism has even begun to spread to Europe and Australia based on observations of freegan websites in these countries, but the largest population still remains in the US (Pietrzyk). In an ethnography on freegans in Illinois, Victoria C. Moré writes, "Globally it appears freegans are generally male, young, independent, and educated" (4). This observation of race, class, and education becomes important when examining the actual change implemented by the freegan movement. As a movement that requires no monetary wealth, the demographics of freegans observed by Moré, indicate a disparity between the egalitarian philosophies of freeganism and the actual implementation of these philosophies. While freegan.info writes, "We envision a world where people reject the arbitrary boundaries that have been used as justifications for oppressions. Regardless of our species, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, or any other constructed boundary, we are all one," the realities of the movement, made up of white men, show that these notions of 'oneness' have not been realized ("Freegan Visions").
Though there is no statistical information on freegan demographics, most articles about and by freegans indicate that, though they may be living in poverty now, they have come from middle to upper class, educated backgrounds. Warren Oakes, author of the unofficial freegan manifesto, is the member of a successful band that plays concerts for profit. Other sources document freegans’ choice to leave middle or upper class lifestyles such as an article in the Chicago Tribune on freegan Madeline Nelson who “is a former corporate executive who can afford to dine at upscale restaurants. But she prefers turning garbage into gourmet meals without spending a cent” (Hayasaki). Many other articles tell similar stories of freegans picking up dumpster diving during college or graduate school or becoming fed up with a corporate lifestyle and turning to freeganism. These stories are the ones that reach the news, which is problematic considering freegans attempt to escape class boundaries. However, there are so many degrees and ways that people can be involved with freeganism, there is no way of knowing if these people are representative of the movement as a whole.

Because of its connection to a variety of radical groups freeganism is really a collection of many ideas, philosophies and practices, yet the movement draws influences from these movements and uses them in distinct ways. Anarchism has a large influence on freeganism and freegan.info provides the website user with several links about anarchism. The website fully asserts that freegans support and are associated with anarchism, although it is not required. Anarchists believe and work towards a socialist world where all central power is abolished and the individual has complete liberty. Many anarchists look to the USSR as proof that communism is not a possible form of socialism, and that “[s]tate industrial planning is not any better than unregulated competition; both waste resources;
both depend on the abridgement of person freedoms; both result in inequality and special privilege. Nation-states, say the anarchists, preserve and distribute power. Anarchists demand its liquidation" (Perlin 10). Like freeganism, anarchism is an attack on the economic and governmental structure that leads to inequality, injustice, and destruction, and thus many freegans also consider themselves anarchists.

Anarchist author Daniel Guérin quotes another prominent anarchist scholar, Wilhelm von Humboldt, who says, "Under the conditions of freedom, 'all peasants and craftsmen might be elevated into artists; that is men who love their own labor for its own sake, improve it by their own plastic genius and inventive skill, and thereby cultivate their intellect, enoble the character, and exalt and refine their pleasures.'" (xi). This idea of returning to direct subsistence as a return to happiness and enjoyment of work, is highly promoted in freegan philosophy. Freegans express that …" we spend our time directly acquiring, repairing and making the things we need, working to share skills and create alternatives—and just plain enjoying our time" (“Freegan Visions”). This idea in anarchism and freeganism expresses these movements’ nostalgia for a past, romanticized way of living, that will be used to build and construct their plans for living in the future.

Along with similar plans for the future, anarchism and freeganism use similar tactics to enact radical reform at a structural level. Anarchists and freegans enact change through non-hierarchical groups that spread their philosophies through their actions, rather than through force. Both these movements believe strongly in fighting for freedom and equality for all people, but freeganism also strongly believes in the freedom and fair treatment of the earth and everything on it. In this regard, freeganism is also closely tied to radical environmental movements.
Many radical environmental movements have used actions similar to freegans to implement change rather than turning to policy or law. Earth First! is one of the most well-known radical environmental movements that practices a form of resistance to degradation called ecotage. This particular movement, and other radical environmental movements were born from people who worked for the mainstream movements who tired of the corruption that was brought on by political involvement and money. The vulnerability of the leadership positions of mainstream movements is one that is avoided by freeganism, which does not have a hierarchical structure. Since freegans have little need for money, they are unlikely to be tempted by it so the movement is thus less susceptible to corruption. Ecotage practiced by Earth First! includes acts of ‘terrorism’ such as tree staking, tree sitting, and sabotage of logging equipment. Like the practices of freegans, these acts symbolically draw attention to the source of environmental problems and try to prevent further harm. Freeganism symbolically points out the wastefulness of capitalism while literally cleaning up the waste by consuming it.

Counter-cuisine and freeganism

Aside from influence and involvement in anarchism and environmentalism, freeganism has its historical roots in the counter-cuisine movements of the 1960s and the various philosophies of the punk subculture of the 1970s. The counter-cuisine movements emerged during the 1960s dynamics of radical protest and change. People were protesting war and government, experimenting with drugs and celebrating nature. For hippies and punks, food and eating emerged as locations and spaces for symbolic and ideological change. The counter-cuisine movement gained force as it distributed knowledge on eating
natural, homemade, vegetarian, and homegrown foods that “[attempt] to break free from the fetishism of food as a commodity” (Clark 21). Counter-cuisine favors brown rice and bread over white, relishing the challenge of eating tough fibers rather than the predigested fibers of white bread and rice (Belasco 49). For these movements, alternative eating was not only a means for bettering the body, soul, and environment, but the counter-cuisine movement used the act of growing and eating food to defy hegemonic norms, as a way towards revolutionary change in society. “[M]any punks identify the body as a place where hegemony is both made and resisted” and so punks resisted the ideologies of easy and fast consumption through alternative eating practices (Clark 23).

Freeganism draws from many of these philosophies, however in several respects freegans have evolved away from counter-cuisine ideas. While the counter-cuisine movement creates the body of the eater as the location for hegemonic change, freegans are more concerned with the means of acquiring food than its consumption. A fruitful dumpster dive for a freegan may produce only packaged chips and instant processed meals, but no matter what the food is and what it is made of, for a freegan it holds value because it has been recovered, saved from the ideological grasp of ‘waste,’ and not because of its content. Different freegans associate more with the counter-cuisine and vegan movements and try to avoid processed foods and animal products as much as they are able; however, what is essential is that “[... 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” (“Freegan Visions”).

As the counter-cuisine movement gained traction and popularity, the food industry began to recognize the threat it presented. For a time, a number of unconfirmed studies
were published which indicated the dangers of vegetarianism or eating brown rice, and the press pummeled organic farming, but the popularity of natural, organic, and healthy eating continued to grow. Many businesses eventually coopted these ideas into their marketing schemes. Companies started new ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ lines of products, and encouraged healthy eating through their products. The fantastic success of health food stores such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s proves the rapid incorporation of countercultural ideas into consumerist ideologies. One of freeganism’s main goals is to escape consumerist ideologies and “[f]reegans say enough of this. We reject it all — the drive for status, the lust for wealth, the sense of power and accomplishment from the purchase of needless commodities. We provide for our needs without feeding the monster” (“Freegan Visions”). Freeganism is highly critical of products that claim to be social or environmentally responsible. They recognize that no commodity is produced without causing human, animal, or earth harm. Most importantly, freegans see that at the root of every problem, whether social, environmental, or economic, capitalism is causing destruction.

**Capitalism and Waste**

According to the United Nations Food Agency, nearly one third of the world’s food is wasted (“UN: Food”). American households alone waste about 40 million metric tons of food every year and in the UK approximately 20 to 40% of produce is thrown out before it even reaches supermarkets and stores. Environmental activist Tristram Stuart, reports these and other statistics about waste and its corresponding environmental degradation. He often also points out how easily global hunger could be appeased with waste redistribution. He writes that “[a]ll the world’s nearly one billion hungry people could be lifted out of malnourishment on less than a quarter of the food that is wasted in the US, UK
and Europe.” The massive amounts of waste produced by (predominantly, but not solely\textsuperscript{2}) the Western world, not only results in overflowing landfills and plastic bag islands, but greatly contributes to air pollution. As Stuart writes, “10% of rich countries’ greenhouse gas emissions come from growing food that is never eaten.” The present mode of production and attitude towards waste has not always been the norm. It is in fact a relatively new phenomenon that has coincided with the rise of consumerism and the insatiable need for more profit that is inherent to capitalism.

In her book called \textit{Waste and Want}, Susan Strasser outlines the history of waste and the development of the current ‘throwaway’ lifestyle. Up until the twentieth century, the waste produced by American households was minimal because food was given great value and nearly all food was used, saved, or repurposed. What little foods scraps could not be eaten or recycled into soap or candles was given to the pigs that many rural families kept in their yards. During the early 1900s, American styles of living changed bringing new ‘necessities’ into the household such as heating and indoor plumbing. Strasser writes that during this time period people began throwing more away because they had less room for it. As household technologies developed so did scientific understanding and the public began gaining more widespread knowledge about sanitation. Cities began garbage collection services for health reasons as well as to promote an aesthetic of cleanliness. Before municipal garbage services, waste and refuse was constantly present and people often threw food into their yard or trash into the street. Once this garbage services began, trash began being shipped long distances to the outskirts of cities or even dumped into the

\textsuperscript{2} North America, Oceania, and Europe produce the most pre and post consumer waste followed by Latin America, North Africa and West and Central Asia. South and Southeast Asia and Subsaharan Africa produce the least amount of waste and the waste in these regions is predominantly preconsumer (Herrman).
ocean. As the majority of people increasingly did not have to interact with or see trash on a daily basis, the understanding of trash and everything affiliated with it, as 'disgusting' became more common. The rag pickers and poor that had lived off of waste up until this time became even more marginalized for their 'dirty' habits. Yet even with this new attitude towards waste, households still sought to be frugal and reuse. Numerous books were published for women teaching them how to mend, repair, reuse, and repurpose for more thrifty living.

As technology advanced, wasting gradually came to be more acceptable when it was for the cause of some new technology or keeping up with the latest styles. The idea of "household efficiency" boomed in the 1920s contributing to a whole market of products that made housework 'easier' for women. This often meant using disposable and pre-packaged products. These shifts towards cleanliness and efficiency built a large market for products that were pre-packaged, easy to use, and easy to dispose of; this has led to the current 'throw away society.'

Cultural studies scholar Michelle Yates outlines the direct link between capitalism and current waste habits in her paper “Ecological Crisis and the Capitalist Accumulation of Waste.” The essential feature of capitalism that makes excessive waste necessary is that “[u]n-like production in pre-capitalist societies, which was oriented toward use, production in capitalism is orientated toward value, valorization, and capital accumulation” (13). The goal in capitalism is to create more and more surplus value in order to be able to create more surplus value, which is the process called valorization. In seeking valorization, companies have turned to methods of production that result in greater productivity in the same amount of time. Since capitalism necessitates always seeking more and more value,
companies continue to produce in hopes of attaining this value, but as every company continues to produce what results is a massive accumulation of material wealth that fails to have its surplus value realized by being sold. Objects that fail to realize their surplus value are then discarded and more objects are produced, because despite the buildup of unrealized commodities, valorization and increasing productivity remain the main goals of capitalist production. Yates emphasizes that,

"[P]roviding subsistence as a metabolic interaction between humans and the natural conditions of production is not the primary goal of labor in capitalism nor is the production of goods that make our lives better, though these are both coincidental outcomes. The primary goal of labor in capitalism is the production of value, specifically for the purposes of valorization and capital accumulation." (14)

Thus, as long as valorization remains the ultimate purpose of capitalism, capitalism will continue to produce massive amounts of waste.

With this in mind, it seems that by naming capitalism as the villain, freegans have identified the source of exploitation and environmental degradation, but there is a disconnect between freegans’ identification of capitalism as the problem and their actions of waste reclamation as the solution. Waste itself is only an accidental byproduct of capitalism and thus, freeganism’s relationship to waste fails to affect the mode of production, which is the actual cause of the waste. Eating food from dumpsters re-injects use-value into the items and slightly reduces the amount of waste that will pile up in landfills, but it fails to change the necessity for valorization. Since wasted objects are items that have not and will not realize their (surplus) value, capitalism has no need for these objects and it is of no consequence if someone does or does not use them. Yates also points
out that "...production drives consumption, not the other way around," (21) and thus the
decreased demand for products by freegans and dumpster divers is again, of no
consequence to continued production and valorization.

Always seeking new ways to promote convenience and efficiency, capitalism not
only produces excessive amounts of useful things like food that can be redistributed and
saved, but also massive amounts of non-useful things like disposable products and
packaging. In terms of 'cleaning up'\(^3\) and reusing useful waste, freegans are slightly
decreasing the amount of these items that will sit in a landfill or ocean, but freegans do not
and cannot do anything about the excessive packaging and plastic that is wasted and
unfortunately, the plastic and packaging is the type of waste causing the most damage to
the environment. So, again, the act of dumpster diving and boycotting the economy is more
an act of 'cleaning up the mess' made by capitalism than it is a direct threat to the mode of
production.

Even though freegans miss targeting the production, their practices of waste
reclamation do fight back against several of the negative aspects of capitalism including
alienation from nature, private property, and commodity fetishism. Marx describes
commodity fetishism as the "mystical character of commodities" that comes from the
invisibility of the labor that produces them (435). Part of the success of freeganism is its
ability to make apparent the labor that is behind commodities. The entire philosophy of
avoiding commodities based on their exploitative nature, references the labor that went
into the commodity that is usually invisible, but has been made visible by freegans.

\(^3\) While doing research I encountered a group of freegans (friends of a friend) living in
Washington DC who would sort through dumpsters for usable food, but would also take out
unusable food, which they would then compost and distribute to community gardens.
There is no way of knowing how many freegans try to reduce waste in this way as well.
Freegans are even critical of the commodified version of environmentalism that has become incredibly popular. One freegan dismantles the Boca Burger, a vegan product associated with healthy and environmentally friendly eating:

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 organochlorides 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.

(freegan.info, “Freegan Visions”)

Boycotting corporations and spreading information about exploitation helps make apparent the invisible labor of capitalism and thus, de-mystify the commodity.

One of the other negative effects of capitalism is alienation that the capitalist laborer feels from other laborers, from themselves, and from nature. Freegans recognize that labor alienates as well as exploits and one of the advantages of eating food from dumpsters is that freegans need little money and thus need to work (for money) very little. Though they do not spend much time working in traditional jobs, freegans combat the notion that they are lazy or ‘freeloaders’ by dedicating their expanded free time to social justice, human
rights, or environmental causes and organizations. What freegans recognize too, is that labor itself does not alienate, but labor specific to capitalism does. Thus, freegans do perform labor (dumpster diving, repairing and making things, cooking, etc), but they avoid, as much as possible, capitalist labor that separates the laborer from the means of production, from the product, as well as the ideologies of Fordism and Taylorism that create ever greater demands on workers. To do so, freegans attempt to cut out the intermediary processes of capitalist production and return to more direct subsistence. Urban scrounging and dumpster diving resemble a more direct subsistence where people labor directly to find their own food, but products recovered from dumpsters only exist because they have been produced by capitalist labor. By dumpster diving and DIYing, freegans enact a practice similar to direct subsistence, but in fact they only add another step between the production and consumption of an object. Regardless, freegans still find that the direct labor that they enact to recover their food is more fulfilling than capitalist labor.

Freeganism also resists capitalist notions of private property and advocates for a world where private property is unnecessary. Freegans resist private property by creating free market places for trading and being involved with organizations like Food Not Bombs, which provide food for anyone who needs it. Freegan.info defies the binds of private property by existing as a public domain⁴ so anyone can access and use the information.

⁴ The bottom of every freegan.info page is stamped with “Public Domain 2008 - 2013 Freegan.info All Human, Animal and Earth Rights Reserved.”
Freegan subjectivity and agency

Freegans have come farther than other movements in recognizing where the root of the problem lies, but freegans' attempt to escape capitalism is unsuccessful. On practical terms, a freegan, especially one living in NYC, cannot actually avoid interacting with the economy in some way. Freegans may never pay for food and they may squat in an abandoned building and never pay rent. They may make or find all their clothes and furniture and ride their own found bikes everywhere they go, but there are certain things that necessitate some involvement in the economy. The unfeasibility of escape is exemplified by the online presence of freegans, which is large enough for this project to be based upon. In order to maintain freegan.info someone must be paying for the domain name and keeping up the website. In fact, on every page of the freegan.info website there is a small box at the bottom of the page that will direct website visitors to a PayPal site that allows them to make donations toward paying for the domain name fee. The many users and visitors of freegan.info and other freegan forums must have computers and Internet with which to access the sites and electricity to power their computers. Freegans still have to pay for healthcare, and many freegans being well educated, are probably still paying off school loans. Warren Oakes, who wrote the freegan manifesto, is the drummer in the fairly well known band Against Me! that tours and sells albums, practices that do not and cannot avoid money. While the members of Against Me! may not be wealthy and their songs may embody freegan and anarchist philosophies, the fact that one of the 'founders' of freeganism is inextricably caught up in capitalism exemplifies the contradiction of the movement and how difficult it is to escape capitalism and the binds of monetary necessity.
Though there is a focus on freegans that avoid economic involvement in any way, as noted previously, there are variations within freeganism and not all freegans even find it necessary to avoid the capitalist economy in all senses. For freegans, the philosophical emphasis is on trying to be outside of capitalism and thus being free of the detrimental impacts of the economic structure. Freegans do not regulate people involved in the movement and recognize the difficulty of the lifestyle they practice. Rather they encourage everyone to be involved to the greatest extent they are able. In the “Philosophy” section they write,

As workers and potential consumers, we view participation in this economy as a form of complicity in practices like sweatshop labor, rainforest destruction, and factory farming. Freegans believe in living ethical, free, and happy lives centered around community and the notion that a healthy society must function on interdependence.

This quote implies that by not supporting companies that exploit, freegans are escaping exploitation entirely in order to live “free, and happy lives.” This is not to say that the lifestyle of freeganism does not promote interdependence and freedom that comes from fighting back against the alienation of labor, nature and from each other, but even the most dedicated freegan cannot entirely escape, as exemplified by their need for internet, healthcare, or education.

Even if freegans somehow managed to live without ever using money, freegans still do not exist in an isolated alternate universe or some vacuum that is separated from capitalism. All freegans, no matter how dedicated to the cause, are still subjects of capitalist ideology. Louis Althusser outlines the idea of the subject as being always created for and by
ideology. Nealon breaks down Althusser’s idea of subjectivity by emphasizing that “[t]he subject is defined by its place among various social positions...Unlike the word ‘self,’ then, the word ‘subject’ carries a certain anonymous sense, as well as the sense of having one’s personhood defined not by intrinsic or internal qualities but by external factors.” (37). Because of the relationship of the subject to specific social conditions, subjectivity is not something that can be chosen, but is a result of the person existing within these conditions. Despite the ways in which freegans resist the dominant ideologies of their time, their subjectivities have already been constituted by their specific location within capitalist ideologies. Althusser calls this idea the “interpellation” of the subject and shows that subjects always exist within and for ideology. He says that “[t]he existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (301). Althusser goes on to point out that because every subject has been interpellated by ideology, there is no such thing as outside of ideology and “[t]hat is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denial of the ideological character of ideology by ideology...[w]hich amounts to saying that ideology has no outside...” (301). The re-signifying actions of freegans work and fight against hegemonic ideology, but they do so in the context of capitalist ideology, not outside of it.

Though freegans are not outside of capitalist ideology, their position within it gives them a particular position, subjectivity, and context from which to enact change and resistance to these ideologies. Nealon indicates that it is “important to point out that to say that something is constructed doesn’t mean that it’s determined in some lockstep way [...] Rather, what something does or what it means depends on how it is used [...] Because all
meaning is contextual, all meaning presupposes an agency, an act, an analysis, a critical reading, to bring it about” (265). So from their position as subjects of capitalist, consumerist ideologies, freegans acknowledge the negotiability of meanings and attempt to change them.

Antonio Gramsci expands upon the notion of negotiability within language with his theories on hegemony. Author Chris Barker defines hegemony by quoting Gramsci, saying that hegemony is “a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria...between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups” (68). Barker goes on to summarize Gramsci’s theory, saying that the interests and ideas of subordinate groups must gain greater dominance in order to challenge the interests and ideologies of the existing dominant group. The challenges and attempts to achieve dominance of ideas by subordinate groups are part of counter-hegemony, a process that paves the way for radical reformation of state power. The practices and philosophies of freeganism are counter-hegemonic. Though freeganism may not present a huge threat to the economic or state powers, they contribute to the essential process of meanings and actions that challenge the hegemonic ideologies of capitalism. Gramsci argues that there are two ‘wars’ to a revolution: the “war of position” and the “war of manoeuvre” (qtd. in Barker 68). The war of position is the challenging of hegemonic ideologies, the war that freegans fight and it is the war that first must be won before revolutionaries can attempt to fight the “war of manoeuvre” and directly attack state power.

The semiotic power of waste

Though freegans exist within the context of capitalism, the practice of dumpster diving specifically challenges hegemonic notions of waste. As capitalism is the ruling
economic structure, ideologies justify the waste inherent to capitalism. When trash means 'unhygienic' and 'useless' it becomes easier for most people to simply continue consuming and wasting. Freegans recognize the negative effects of this ideology and resist it through dumpster diving. Reusing waste that is dominantly seen as useless or dirty challenges these notions and makes apparent the damaging effects of the 'throwaway society.' Using Dick Hebdige and Stuart Hall's analyses of subcultures, this section reveals the hegemonic shifts that can or have resulted from the signification and re-signification of waste that occurs when freegans renew use-value to discarded food or other products by rescuing and using them.

Hall and Hebdige elaborate on the semiotics of subcultures through the example of punks, mods, and teddy boys. While freeganism aligns more with counterculture than with subculture, the counter-hegemonic power of freeganism can be examined using their methods, and as mentioned previously, freeganism shares many similarities and influences with punk culture. Hall and Hebdige outline the parameters of subculture, emphasizing the subculture's connection to the parent culture and its corresponding class (Hall 14). As ethnographer Moré observed, most freegans are white, educated males, who most likely come from middle to upper class backgrounds and unlike the direct connection of subculture to class, freegans make a definitive effort to escape the stratification of the class system. Despite the fact that freegans try not to participate in the economy and thus money theoretically holds no value for them, freegans have not actually escaped the class system,

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5 Hebdige and Hall specifically analyze subculture and emphasize that "they [subcultures] continue to exist within, and coexist with, the more inclusive culture of the class from which they spring" (14). As a counterculture and not a subculture, freeganism rejects and distances itself from all parent cultures and all class stratification. Thought there is some difference between subculture and counterculture, Hebdige and Hall's methods are also applicable to freeganism.
which is one of the limitations of the movement. Freegans choose to leave their middle or upper class backgrounds to live with hardly any money and need little money. They are extremely poor, making the practices of freeganism theoretically accessible to anyone willing to jump into a dumpster, yet the movement remains made up of a decidedly privileged group of people. The class stratification that still exists despite their efforts to escape it, creates limitations in freeganism’s ability to proliferate their practices and philosophies, that will ultimately result in the restructuring of society. Freeganism’s constitution of such a privileged demographic of people limits the potential counterhegemonic power of the movement. But this does not stop freegans from resisting in order for a societal restructuring to occur. Movements such as freeganism continually push back against hegemonic power and the more push against hegemony, the more these counterhegemonic notions will take hold.

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige delves more into the semiotic significances of subcultures and their associated signs as tools of resistance. Using Roland Barthes, Hebdige examines the ever-evolving systems of meaning as territories for hegemonic resistance. The history of waste and trash reveals that ‘waste’ has certainly not held fixed meaning throughout history and is constantly developing, even in the last several years and months. The ideological understanding of waste is what Barthes would consider a ‘myth.’ Mythologies are the ideological meanings that create the “mystification which transforms petit bourgeois culture into a universal nature” (Barthes ix). Myths “depoliticize” and “dehistoricize” meaning, creating the universal notion that waste is a necessary inconvenience that should be dealt with quietly without disrupting the processes of production and consumption. This ideology reinforces the excessive production of
capitalism that creates waste. In the mythological understanding, waste has been radically decontextualized, which means most people give little consideration to the actual material consequences of capitalist waste habits. Myths are enforced by a number of different hegemonic methods to the point where the mythological understanding of waste seems like a natural and universal truth. The important thing for Barthes, Hebdige, and for this analysis, is to understand that mythologies are not permanent and that signs are spaces of hegemonic struggle.

Freegans, like punks and other subculture groups analyzed by Hebdige, intervene in the production of meaning, in the space of struggle, in the hopes of producing new meanings in a sign. Punks use their fashion style and music to create hegemonic shifts in meaning while freegan ‘style’ is dumpstered food, furniture, clothes, and the actual act of dumpster diving itself. Barthesian mythological waste is ‘gross,’ ‘useless,’ and ‘untouchable’ yet freegans make a point to touch and use waste. For punks and freegans, “style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’” (Hebdige 18). The common understanding of waste is that it is dirty, unusable, and useless, something that someone else should hide away quietly and forget about, but when freegans eat from a dumpster or flaunt a dumpstered sweater, they disrupt the normalcy of these ideas. Freegans re-signify waste by reinstating and refilling wasted items with use-value. In the process of revaluing wasted items, freegans also interfere in the production of ideas regarding how much we waste and why. America alone produces enough food waste to feed thousands of freegans, with plenty of food to spare. Many freegans have reported that they simply cannot recover all the food that they find in dumpsters and frequently freegans leave dives with enough food to feed
themselves for weeks and still have to leave edible food behind. This action intervenes in the common assumption that the world simply does not produce enough food to feed its people, a mythology meant to cover over and justify the massive wealth inequality that leaves millions of people hungry or with limited access to enough food. Freegans challenge the notion of ‘usefulness’ and in so doing challenge and make apparent the mythologies and ‘common senses’ meant to justify inequality and environmental destruction.

In regards to the ideological intervention that freegans create through their actions, the movement is experiencing success, but these accomplishments are not without limitations. Hebdige devotes a section of his book to examining the “incorporation” of subcultures and counterhegemonic actions into dominant ideologies, which is the process of filling signs with mythological meaning (92). Again referencing some of the ways that punks moved from dangerous resistance to hip, ‘rebel’ music that ceases to challenge hegemonic norms, Hebdige describes how incorporation can occur in one of two ways: through ideological absorption and/or commodification. Despite their limited involvement in the capitalist economy, freegans and freeganism are not exempt from incorporation.

One of the ways freeganism distinguishes itself as such a radical movement, is its ability to resist some forms of commodification that have de-radicalized movements in the past. Since freeganism attempts to nullify the very idea of consumerism, the temptation for freegan practices to be commodified is not as great as in other movements. Freegans are interested in where things are from, not what they are and because of this freegans maintain an awareness of the production of the objects they use, making them less susceptible to consuming a commodified product. That being said, it is important to note again that freegans are not ‘outside’ of capitalism and so to some extent will always have
some need for money, no matter how much they do not want to. With this in mind, it can be acknowledged that freegans may resist some amount of commodification, but they are not entirely exempt from it.

In regards to shifting meanings regarding waste, freeganism has the potential to represent a significant threat to hegemonic ideologies of waste and consumerism, and the movement is thus subject to Hebdige’s notion of ideological ‘absorption.’ Within the last couple of years popular television shows Parks and Recreation and Portlandia have both had episodes satirizing freegans and portraying them as ‘crazy radicals.’ The mythological notion of waste as being unhygienic is deep set to the extent that it is easy for freegans to be criticized for being dirty and disease-ridden from the ‘trash’ they eat.

Besides popular media turning freegans into the laughable ‘dirty hippie’ or ‘slacker’ character, freeganism, like other radical movements, has suffered harsh criticism. Online sources debate the safety of eating from dumpsters and loudly complain about the ‘laziness’ of freegans. The online, user-created dictionary, Urban Dictionary, defines freegans as people who are “[s]tealing resources from homeless guys who actually need it since whenever the fuck they graduated from NYU” (“Freegan”). On the material front, it has become increasingly common for stores to lock or fence off their dumpsters making it very difficult or impossible for freegans to enter them, but this does not stop freegans from trying to find new ways to save and reuse.

Conclusion

Though this paper offers a criticism of freeganism, the movement and its participants deserve recognition for the beneficial work that they do. Freeganism is a radical movement that requires a commendable amount of commitment and the actions
performed by freegans at the very least reduce waste and promote a spirit of community, egalitarianism, and activism. The criticisms of this movement are meant to offer more ways for the movement to continue challenging the damaging effects of capitalism. What is hopeful about this analysis is that freegans do have the agency to create change and they do begin the important process of reshaping meanings, which leads to eventually the reshaping of society. Anarchist scholar Terry M. Perlin writes:

Like other heretical movements, the counter-culture [is] by definition ephemeral. It [is] easily bought out or converted by established forces. Yet its impact [is] undeniable, especially in the realm of values. Each young man who refused the draft, each family that rejected the atomism of isolated suburban existence in search of communal harmony, each young rebel who rejected the authority of political party politics, preferring the authenticity of the autonomous political act, behaved in the anarchist idiom. (8)

So too, every person who forgoes buying a packaged meal from a grocery store in order to eat the mountains of food thrown away, perpetuates the cause of freegans.

The movement does, of course, have limits including the problem of waste being a product not a cause of capitalism and the limited reaches of the movement.

So some questions to consider are: What causes the gap between a philosophy of egalitarianism and an actualized egalitarian existence? How can freegans continue to challenge mythological notions of waste to shift dominant attitudes about consuming and disposing while also challenging the actual mode of production?

Freeganism is such a large and diverse movement that this paper is by no means a complete analysis of the movement. Similar critiques could and should be made of the
many other practices of freeganism such as squatting or DIY practices. Similarly, there is much to explore in the representations of freegans and even responses to freeganism such as the increasing security of dumpsters. Despite the criticism of freeganism, the movement asks us, humans and members of the earth, to take an important first step in becoming critical of our daily practices. Freegans see the world critically and they question assumptions that lead to harm for humans and the earth. They ask us to

Think about how your life is wrapped up in the game of consumptions: think about the job you hate, the ugly billboards in your community, the horrible waste, the stink, the fast pace and lack of compassion that surround you and understand that as you consume it, it consumes you. How much of your day is spent dealing with money? How does money affect your ideas about other people? Think about how much more to life there is and find it, do it, go! (Oakes)
Works Cited


