

One Person's Garbage...Another Person's Treasure: Dumpster Diving, Freeganism, And Anarchy

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It is not surprising that within societies of mass consumerism, consumption practices would be key areas of struggle. Indeed the rise of mass consumerism has given rise not only to corresponding criticisms of consumerism, but to movements organizing to challenge regimes of mass consumption. Among the sharpest contemporary critics of consumerism are anarchists. Much of present day anarchism is devoted to a critique of consumer society and, inspired by ecological thought, to developing alternative visions of production, consumption and culture. In place of the wastefulness of mass consumption anarchists attempt to build conservator lifestyles around practices of mutual aid, re-using and minimal purchase.

One anarchist writer has commented that some anarchists self-identify as "people who marginalize themselves voluntarily" (Subways, 14). These "marginals" exist largely outside of the labour market and include students, the unemployed, the under-employed, and street persons. Activists support themselves in a variety of ways, such as performance, craft sales, music or free-lance journalism. To these we might add the clandestine self-sustainers who support themselves through such creative and sometimes illegal activities as squatting or "dumpster-diving".

In this paper I discuss the latter activity, dumpster diving, as anarchist political praxis. While most political commentators overlook such seemingly idiosyncratic acts I prefer to understand the potential political significance of such marginal activities. Dumpster diving is an act of what anarchists refer to as "propaganda of the

deed." It is an attempt to do something that is useful, providing food, clothing or household goods to people who need it, while also sending an overt message about the importance and possibility of conservation. Indeed dumpster diving is only one part of a broader expression of anti-consumerist relations known as "freeganism."

As Yale sociologist Laurie Essig (2002) notes, the equivalent of dumpster diving has been around likely since the beginning of human life. Humans are scavengers after all. Beyond this, however, Essig (2002) argues: "What is new about today's waste liberation movement, sometimes known as 'Do It Yourselfers' (DIY) or just plain old anarchists, is that it is part of the larger movement against global capitalism, a movement made most visible when they gather en masse at G7 meetings and other iconic events of the global economy." These DIY movements, which are international in scope, consist of a variety of practices, including dumpster diving, geared towards building alternative social relations that are, as much as possible, lived beyond the dictates of states and markets. As Essig (2002) suggests: "Do It Yourselfers are not just living off the grid, but *off of* the excess that the grid produces. In an incredibly idealistic act of faith, they believe that by redirecting consumer capitalism's 'waste stream' to those in need, they are actually dismantling the master's house with the master's tools."

What many commentators find most significant about DIY is its overcoming of the divide between art and life, between hope and reality (See Jordan, 1998; McKay, 1998). DIY anarchists view contemporary ecological and social crises as a "cultural problem," a problem of systemic values, as well as an economic problem. This leads to the suggestion that the response must also include a cultural critique (See Jordan, 1998:130). In place of the "purchasing of pleasure" anarchists assert the "arming of desire" to create their own pleasures.

In place of the logic of the market and production for profit, freeganism offers the alternative of social relations organized around

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the vision of a gift economy. In this regard many freegans refer to the anthropological and sociological writings of Marcel Mauss who argued that societies without states and markets, far from engaging in undeveloped market activity through barter, actually desired social interaction based around gift relations rather than through utilitarian or instrumental exchanges. Anarchist anthropologist and Yale professor, David Graeber (2004: 21) argues that gift economies:

were not based on calculation, but on a refusal to calculate; they were rooted in an ethical system which consciously rejected most of what we would consider the basic principles of economics. It was not that they had not yet learned to seek profit through the most efficient means. They would have found the very premise that the point of an economic transaction – at least, one with someone who was not your enemy – was to seek the greatest profit deeply offensive.

Advanced capitalist societies are organized around surplus value or valorization for capital. That IS one reason why perfectly useable goods will be discarded rather than given away. Surplus value simply cannot be realized if free alternatives are readily available. Against surplus value, freegans pursue what some heterodox Marxists call "self-valorization. This is the pursuit of productive and distributive activities that are based on the realization of human need whether material, emotional or ideational.

Essig (2002) suggests that "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." While most anarchists would avoid making such grand claims about their efforts they would agree that their aim is to live in a way that limits their negative ecological impact while reducing as much as possible their contribution to the perpetuation of capitalist systems of

commodity exchange. This is not intended as a moralizing condemnation of individual consumption practices, since anarchists recognize the various social, cultural and economic pressures that underpin wasteful consumption practices in the present era. Rather dumpster diving is presented both as a critique of social structures of waste and an attempt to offer practical initiatives that might undermine those structures.

Freeganism is based on the recognition that economies of excess and luxury rest on mounds of waste. The availability and diversity of goods available in dumpsters has taught divers that there is little need to purchase new items from stores. Dumpstering can provide a, perhaps shocking, abundance of food that can be eaten safely. Grocery stores can be a plentiful source of fruits and vegetables. On a less healthy note, pharmacies can be a good source for candy.

durkie (2003) notes the bounty that can come from bakeries, on a regular basis. Indeed the supply can be so plentiful that local divers cannot keep up with it: "We have the option to stock up once a week from our local bakery, but often we have so many bagels, baguettes, focaccia, cinnamon buns, coffee rolls, and bread loaves from previous dives that it isn't necessary to stock up but once a month or every three weeks." This is where anarchist divers come in since rather than dumpstering for personal use, they are gathering items for collective use and free distribution.

Beyond food, particularly useful items that can be regularly dumpstered include furniture, appliances, books, clothing and consumer electronics such as stereos or VCRs. 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.

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This may even include computers that have been dumpstered, fixed up and made available for free community use. In this way computers that would have otherwise found their way into a landfill are made available for people who would otherwise lack computer access. The international anarchist computer network TAO Communications had its beginnings with discarded computer equipment. From an original salvaged machine TAO went on to run at least eight computers and provide services for more than 1000 people globally, including supporting thousands of e-mail lists, hundreds of web pages along with databases for progressive projects (Shantz, 2003). All of this has been done largely on equipment that had been thrown out.

Perhaps the best known of organized anarchist freegans are Food Not Bombs (FNB). FNB was founded by eight friends in Boston in 1980 and has grown to involve hundreds of groups in cities and towns throughout the United States and Canada. Food Not Bombs uses discarded food, either from donations or dumpsters, to prepare and distribute free vegan (food involving no animal products) meals at least once a week, every week, for homeless and poor people. Perhaps tellingly, FNB organizers are often harassed by police simply for the act of providing free food in poor communities. According to a founder of Food Not Bombs, this relates as much to the anarchist message presented by the group as by its food distribution (See Plocek, 2004).

For anarchist freegans dumpstering is part of a broader concern with the conservation of resources. While many dumpster out of necessity, most anarchists do it, additionally, because of concerns over the environmental impact of waste in advanced capitalist societies (Smith, 2003). As Essig (2002) suggests, dumpster diving is not solely about need: "It is often about a political impulse to liberate the excesses of the rich for the poor. It is part of a larger ideology of radical nonconsumption. Thirty years ago, the Diggers liberated the waste of capitalism for those in need. Long before the Diggers, Franciscan monks liberated the waste of feudalism."

Many divers believe that mass consumerism and the waste it produces represent a great misuse of social as well as natural resources. In addition, it encourages a mass redistribution of income upward as poor and working people give over their earnings to powerful corporations. Conservation would allow for a reassignment of labour and natural resources towards socially necessary and beneficial products and services. Simultaneously, and more importantly for some, it would deprive multinational corporations of substantial parts of their income flow thus halting or at least slowing the upward flow of revenue out of working class and poor communities. As Essig (2003) notes: "Doing-it-yourself doctrine relies on a critique of capitalism as an immoral distribution of wealth, and on an anarchist-inspired call to action...Instead, the waste of the miserable system is diverted to the miserable -- or whoever happens to be around when the bounty arrives." A curbing of the wastefulness of capitalist consumer culture might allow for a more equitable increase in living standards. In the meantime dumpster divers try to divert some of the waste stream towards meeting human needs.

Freegan dumpster diving violates some of the most strongly espoused values of advanced capitalist society. Among these are notions of the mania/primacy of cleanliness which have reached almost manic/its fever pitch proportions in advertising for "whiter than white" cleaners and which have taken on added significance in relation to fears of contagion over such illnesses as SARS and West Nile Virus. Many outside observers find the prospect of climbing inside a foul-smelling garbage bin revolting enough without even contemplating the idea of wearing or eating something found inside the bin. As one diver suggests: "I think, for some people, it's a matter of pride...They don't want to feel like they have to do that. Society's view of garbage is that it's no longer anything but trash; it's dirty" (Quoted in Plocek, 2004).

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Dumpstering, and the uses to which dumpstered items are put points up the lack of hands-on knowledge people have of, especially consumer electronics, items since many goods are discarded as broken, when in fact they are rather easily repaired. Dumpstering has encouraged many anarchists to learn such skills such as soldering or basic electronics. At the same time dumpstering rejects the notion, encouraged by mass advertising, that one must regularly upgrade consumer goods to keep up with the newest most improved trend. It is the antithesis of competitive consumerism and "keeping up with the Jones."

Perhaps more significantly, dumpster diving goes against the grain of the throwaway sensibilities of the era of mass disposable consumerism. In fact dumpster diving is only possible as an ongoing activity because of the routine wastefulness of contemporary society. As Essig (2003) puts it: "Dumpster divers also are siphoning off the one thing consumer capitalism cannot live without: waste. Without waste, consumer capitalism cannot charge for the luxury of the flawless tomato or the freshly baked bagel...In other words, without waste, conspicuous consumption becomes far less conspicuous." A culture based on pursuit of exchange value would rather throw something away than give it away once the opportunity for a sale is over.

Dumpster diving also comes up against, in rather absurd ways, with issues of proprietorship in capitalist economies. Despite its status as refuse, garbage is still considered the property of the person or business that put it there. Many cities have passed bylaws against the handling of material that has been placed for collection. Freegans must contend with guard dogs and trash compactors put in place by business owners who see profits in protecting their garbage. Even worse, in order to keep up demand or prices for saleable goods some markets or restaurants put bleach into discarded food products specifically to keep them from being used without purchase. In an extreme case, there is the instance of an Oakland freegan who was shot while dumpster diving and almost lost his life (Plocek, 2004).

This garbage proprietorship is also expressed in the fact that it is often multinational fast food chains that have the strongest dumpster security, including in some cases razor wire enclosures. Plocek (2004) describes a compound set up behind one McDonald's restaurant in Houston: "A large cinder-block building is locked tight by a metal gate. On top of the structure, broken bottles have been cemented onto the blocks. And then there's concentration-camp-style razor wire on top of all that. Inside the building are one Dumpster and a grease trap." In discussing an encounter with razor wire at a Krispy Kreme, Durkie (2003) notes the relation between sales and garbage: "And yes, razorwire is the same thing used to keep prisoners from escaping. That is how plentiful the doughnuts are. Places like Krispy Kreme and bakeries are such easy targets because an essential quality of the storebought baked goods is freshness and hotness. Thus, day-old baked goods are trashed or given to homeless shelters."

Dumpster diving also confronts some deeply ingrained notions of class, status and poverty that hold rummaging through garbage bins to be a certain marker of need. Picking through garbage bins conjures images of homelessness and despair which, unfortunately, in advanced capitalist societies stir sentiments, not of systemic crisis or inequity, but, rather, personal failure or individual pathology. Dumpster diving, as a conscious and proud activity, shifts the emphasis back where it rightly belongs, on the wastefulness (in human, natural and material terms) inherent in a society based on exploitation, exchange, profit and inequality. It challenges the observer to ask, not why one might dumpster dive, but rather why one would not.

It is difficult for even the most optimistic among us to believe that eating trash will actually have an impact on global capitalism, but it does have a cultural one. To eat "trash" is to go against our cultural consciousness, which imagines that food can be

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"tossed" from the realm of what can be safely seen and discussed into an abject state of invisibility and taboo. To consume the abject trash is to risk contamination and status as a fully civil human being (Essig, 2003).

Beyond the more obviously political aspects of freeganism, there are other points that might be mentioned. As political activities go dumpster diving also has one rare characteristic to recommend it: it is fun. Dumpster diving also provides an enjoyable social activity as it is typically done collectively. Indeed in many cities affinity groups have formed solely to go out dumpster diving together on set days of the month.

Freeganism and specific acts like dumpster diving are about building broader relations of solidarity. For Mauss, within the gift economies, gifts were exchanged as symbols of webs of obligation linking members of the community, what anarchists like Peter Kropotkin call mutual aid. Contemporary freegan gift exchanges are also acts of mutual aid and expressions of affinity. Significantly there is no sense of obligation among the anarchists and people are free to participate as they need to or as they see fit. As one freegan comments: "What we're doing is not charity...It's solidarity. Because charity implies a handing down, like we have it and we're better and we are nice enough to give it to someone else. We believe that we have no more of a right to food than anyone else" (Quoted in Plocek, 2004). Solidarity rather than charity or obligation is a key distinction for anarchists. They act as a matter of principle and ask for nothing in return. One does not have to convert to anarchism to take part.

Freegans may well remain on the social and political margins. Such marginal groupings have long offered highly original, creative resistance to corporatist articulations. Such creativity, largely ignored as modes or sites of politics by sociologists, is expressed in a number of ways by which consumer culture is simultaneously disrupted or subverted: exposing commodity fetishism, resisting

capitalist development, occupations of sites of consumption such as shopping malls, boycotts or "buy nothing days", do-it-yourself production and exchange outside of capitalist markets.

The final point to be made is that most dumpster divers would prefer to render themselves extinct. As one FNB member concludes: "I'll eat anything out of the Dumpster...but I wish it weren't there. I'd like eventually for our society to not have waste like that" (Quoted in Plocek, 2004). In the meantime there is plenty to go around.

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