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‘Waving the banana’ at capitalism: Political theater and social movement strategy among New York’s ‘freegan’ dumpster divers

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Abstract

This article presents an ethnographic study of ‘freegans’, individuals who use behaviors like dumpster diving for discarded food and voluntary unemployment to protest against environmental degradation and capitalism. While freegans often present their ideology as a totalizing lifestyle which impacts all aspects of their lives, in practice, freegans emphasize what would seem to be the most repellant aspect of their movement: eating wasted food. New Social Movement (NSM) theory would suggest that behaviors like dumpster diving are intended to assert difference and an alternative identity, rather than make more traditional social movement claims. Through the lens of social dramaturgy, I engage with New Social Movement theory by arguing that unconventional tactics like dumpster diving can also have strategic components, serving to project a favorable image of movement organizations, recruit new participants, and achieve a positive portrayal in the mainstream media.

Keywords

dumpster diving, New Social Movements, freeganism, social dramaturgy, waste, consumerism, New York City

On one night in December 2007, David,¹ a man with a thick mane of black hair and an unkempt beard, dressed in a stained, oversized sweatshirt and torn jeans, roots through trash bags outside a supermarket in Manhattan, New York City.

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Encountering dozens of bags containing hundreds of pounds of packing materials, cartons, and food waste, he carefully feels the outsides until he encounters one containing bread or produce. Once opened, he sorts the food inside, separating spoiled, inedible food from usable items that the store has thrown out because they are just past their 'sell-by' date or are not moving off the shelves fast enough. His actions are methodical, suggesting that this is far from his first time 'dumpster diving'.² At first glance, there is little about this scene that seems particularly out of the ordinary in a city with a homeless population of 36,000,³ at least some of whom must rely on wasted food to survive.

After David has finished salvaging the still edible items from the bags, though, he does something that an observer might not anticipate. Rather than stashing the food he has gathered inside his backpack, he piles it on the sidewalk – and then launches into a scathing, 10-minute speech indicting mass consumption and capitalism. His speech imbues seemingly innocuous items – which a few minutes before had seemed destined to join the 40–50 percent of US food production sent to landfills each year (Jones, 2004) – with deep political significance. A bruised tomato acts as a vehicle to lambast labor practices on corporate farms; a discarded carton of eggs opens up an opportunity to attack factory farming; organic lettuce provides a medium for a tirade against 'green consumerism' – the notion that capitalism can be ecologically sustainable with minor changes to buying practices (Rogers, 2005). The speech, which David calls 'Waving the banana' after one of his finds, closes with a call for a new social model founded in cooperation, communalism, and a 'gift economy'. While in an ideological milieu as diverse as New York City, anti-capitalist screeds are not hard to find, David's speech attracts the rapt attention of over 20 people, a racially diverse group ranging from high school students to retirees. Some of these onlookers hold conventional professions as schoolteachers, postal workers, and businesspeople; others are full-time activists. Despite a temperature below 10 degrees Fahrenheit, the group is joined by camera crews from a Norwegian news network and an American cable television channel.

Clearly, this sidewalk protest is a situation laden with sociological incongruities, not the least of which being that – in contrast to our typical assumption that people eating from the trash do so out of desperation – David and the individuals with him are dumpster diving voluntarily. They do so as a way of practicing 'freeganism', an ideology adopted by a growing number of individuals worldwide who share disaffection with the mainstreaming of the environmental and animal rights movements and skepticism of corporate and popular 'green-washing'.⁴ Freegans engage in anti-consumerist practices like dumpster diving, 'squatting' abandoned buildings, 'guerilla gardening' in vacant city lots, foraging for wild food, bicycling and hitchhiking, voluntary unemployment, and radical community activism. According to the New York-based website and organization freegan.info – probably the world's most visible freegan group – 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.

This broad list of principles captures some of freeganism's ideological diversity. Some practitioners see it as a revolutionary anti-capitalist ideology, while for others it is a common-sense way to reduce waste and minimize one's ecological footprint. 'Freegan' itself is a combination of the words 'free' and 'vegan', and the philosophy behind freeganism is a fusion of both. While vegans protest animal exploitation by abstaining from consuming animal products, freegans protest over-consumption by abstaining from consuming anything that must be purchased.

In reality, of course, this absolute ideology is only ever enacted in part, and freegans inevitably emphasize certain practices while downplaying others. Explaining this hierarchy of behaviors – particularly, why freegans choose to put so much emphasis on dumpster diving for food, an activity that is anathema for most people – is the key objective of this article. I approach this puzzle by framing freeganism as a 'New Social Movement' (NSM), a conceptualization of post-modern, post-industrial mobilizations developed by, among others, Melucci (1980, 1989, 1996). Recent NSM scholars have explained the unconventional tactics of NSMs – such as dumpster diving – as reflecting these movements' overwhelming focus on the expression of personal and collective identity (see e.g. Foweraker, 1995; Haenfler, 2004; Kaldor, 2003; Langman, 2005; Waterman, 2005). In this article, I suggest that recent literature to some extent misses that the NSM approach, as originally conceived, treats collective behavior by groups like the freegans as reflecting a mix of both a 'new' focus on identity construction and an 'old' emphasis on movement-building and the making of political claims. Making sense of dumpster diving – and, more broadly, the long-term significance of seemingly marginal movements like freeganism – requires attention to both the expressive *and* strategic functions of such non-traditional behavior.

This article is based upon an 18-month ethnographic study of the New York City-based website and organization 'freegan.info', which included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of key freegan documents and communications. I begin my argument by reviewing the literature on NSMs, and showing how freegan.info fits into the framework created by Melucci and others. Existing publications on dumpster diving, scavenging, and freeganism, however, largely eschew a social movement interpretation and treat freeganism as a totalizing, sub-cultural lifestyle. Yet most participants in freegan.info do not entirely 'drop out' of capitalism. Instead, they engage in a limited repertoire of practices, with dumpster diving being by far the most central. This emphasis on dumpster diving seems odd, since eating food waste seems to be an entirely unappealing mode of collective action. This article explores freegan collective dumpster dives as acts of political street theater, through the lens of social dramaturgy introduced by Goffman (1959). I ultimately suggest that freegans perform their identities through dumpster diving in a way that is, at least in part, strategically

calculated to garner media attention, attract new adherents, and make concrete demands.

The freegan social movement

'New Social Movement' theory emerged to analyze and interpret the proliferation in the 1960s of movements centered on women's and gay liberation, environmental protection, student protest, peace, nuclear disarmament, anti-racism, and urban renewal (Boggs, 1986; Eder, 1990). NSMs emerged out of profound changes to the productive systems of society, and are thus seen as 'post-industrial, post-modern, post-materialist, post-Fordist [and] post-class' (Lee, 2007: 4; Melucci, 1980). While NSMs have always been marked by their diversity, certain features – many of which are shared by freegan.info – are common to the majority of these movements. Most reject formal politics, instead directing collective action towards the cultural sphere (Melucci, 1996; Offe, 1985; Touraine, 1981). Thus, while freegans often discuss the need for 'revolution', such talk is almost never accompanied by calls for seizing the state or introducing new legislation. In place of more traditional political activism, NSMs politicize fields of behavior – such as, in the freegans' case, food consumption and waste – traditionally free from contention, stimulating 'radical questions about the ends of personal and social life' (Melucci, 1989: 12; Teske, 1997; Touraine, 2004).

On a micro-level, the focus of NSMs on cultural and personal liberation is typically manifested in fluid, non-hierarchical organizational structures (Johnston et al., 1994; Pichardo, 1997). Freegan.info, for example, has no formal membership, constitution, mission statement, or leadership. Decisions are made by consensus and carried out by autonomous working groups. Freegans do not just view this mode of organization instrumentally. The very way in which the group operates is one way freegans seek to live out their principles, or, as Melucci (1996) suggested, carry out the NSM project of generating new meanings, symbols, and lifestyles. Graeber (2009) discusses how these same principles of non-hierarchical and decentralized decision-making were deployed in the dramatic protests of the 1990s and early 2000s against the World Trade Organization and other international financial institutions. Not coincidentally, many freegans reported a strong affinity for international movements against global capitalism, unfair trade practices, and planet-wide environmental degradation, and some participated in these protests themselves. Nonetheless, the 'new' transnational activist networks of the anti-globalization movement are distinct from ideal-type NSMs (Della Porta, 2007; Smith and Bandy, 2005; Tarrow, 2006). While both may claim ideological links to global issues, NSMs typically engage in more localized tactics (Lee, 2007; Wieviorka, 2005). While freeganism might be a global movement, the activities of freegan.info as an organization – like dumpster diving, hosting community meals, and organizing a bike workshop – all focus on individual and community-directed action within New York City.

Most importantly, for the purposes of this article, NSMs are also associated with the use of non-violent, attention-grabbing, and highly unconventional tactics (Gamson, 1991; Johnston et al., 1994). Model NSMs choose arenas for collective action that are 'presumed safe' from contention, subverting and re-appropriating popular symbols in ways that force people to take notice (Gamson, 1991). By targeting fields where 'symbolic investments and pressure to conform are heaviest' (Melucci, 1989: 12), collective actors create spaces in which they can assert an alternative identity. This point has been extended by some authors, who argue that the use of these tactics shows that NSM actors have a 'non-rational focus on identity and expression' (Gamson, 1991: 37). As such, movements have often been interpreted as being primarily concerned with earning the right to practice an alternative lifestyle, rather than influencing society more broadly (Cerulo, 1997; Kauffman, 1990; Teske, 1997).⁵ NSMs, some have argued, have abandoned the traditional leftist concern with redistribution in favor of a politics of recognition, which drastically alters their capacity to achieve long-term change (Aronowitz, 1992; Fraser, 1995; Young, 1990).

The limited existing literature on dumpster diving and freeganism reflects similar understandings about freegan collective action. Although some studies describe scavenging as a 'meandering series of scattered situations' (Ferrell, 2006: 32; Medina, 2007), recent research on self-identified freegans has emphasized that dumpster diving can be an 'overtly political' act (Autio et al., 2009: 46; Stuart, 2009; Thomas, 2010). In keeping with the way NSM theory has been applied, however, dumpster diving is treated principally as a means of 'performing difference' (Edwards and Mercer, 2007: 291). Although some scholars have explicitly labeled freeganism as a 'social movement' (Gross, 2009; Thomas, 2010), then, absent from these portrayals is one of the classic characteristics of social movement collective action: 'sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities' (Loveman, 1998: 479). Instead, the main goal of the freegans depicted in these studies is *disengagement*: dumpster diving is one among many tactics used to create an independent 'subsistence economy' outside of capitalism (Ferrell, 2006: 170; Gross, 2009: 74). In this formulation, freegans are marked not just by an ideological orientation but also their 'dress, lifestyle politics, and whom they socialize with' (Edward and Mercer, 2007: 284; Black, 2007), and, as in other youthful anti-capitalist subcultures, participants are motivated not just by a desire for social change, but also community and fun (Fincham, 2007; Wettergren, 2009).

The boundaries of freeganism

These scholarly portrayals of freegans as 'dropping out' and creating an independent subculture are consistent with how freegans represent their own ideology. The unofficial freegan 'manifesto' – an anonymous pamphlet called

Why Freegan? (2000) – presents freegans as individuals who have made a complete break with the conventional economy and mainstream society:

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.

The activists of *freegan.info* repeatedly presented freeganism as an all-encompassing set of ideologies and practices, explaining that serious adherents should aim to 'drop out of capitalism completely' and 'spend no money'. In their view, *freegan.info* serves these long-term aims by creating a set of parallel institutions through which people can provide for their needs outside of capitalism. To this end, *freegan.info* operates a free bike workshop in the low-income Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, holds regular sewing 'skill shares' to make clothing from discarded fabric, hosts community meals with dumpster-dived food, and organizes 'wild-food foraging' tours in Brooklyn's Prospect Park.

In actuality, though, freegans must compromise their ideology with the practicalities of life in New York City. Many freegans idealize 'squatting' – the illegal occupation of abandoned buildings – because it creates a physical space in which alternative social and economic relationships can develop. When one freegan returned from a 'squat tour' he took to various activist houses in Barcelona, over 50 people crammed into a community center to hear him speak about his experiences. At the end of the talk, one person rose and asked the room if anyone knew of any similar rent-free living situations in New York. The group – usually lively in discussing opportunities to become more involved in freegan practices – fell silent. 'True freegans', one group member told me, 'don't pay rent', and yet the reality is that the vast majority of them do. Some share communal housing in activist collectives, others have moved out of high-rent Manhattan flats and purchased tiny apartments in Brooklyn, and one or two members of the group have been known to camp out for weeks at a time in the *freegan.info* office (for which *freegan.info* pays rent). None of these spaces is truly *free*.⁶

Like other anarchist-influenced groups, resistance to wage labor is a key component of freegan ideology (Ferrell, 2006; Graeber, 2004). As one freegan explained, 'Money is the fuel for global destruction, so any job for money *is* the problem.' Hypothetically, through dumpster diving for food and clothing, squatting, and using bicycles for transport, freegans can eliminate the need for paid employment. As I just pointed out, however, many freegans must find a way to make monthly rent payments. The effects of this need for money ripple outward. Freegans must work to pay rent, which in turn reduces the time they have available to scavenge goods or develop the skills to make them themselves, which in turn creates an even stronger tether to the conventional monetary economy. Jennifer – a

well-educated lifetime activist in her mid-thirties – explained to me the complex negotiations involved in working:

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. 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.

Work and housing are not the only two fields in which contradictions between ideology and practice surface. Many freegans described modern technology as alienating, and told me that they were acutely aware of the ethical problems of electronics production, such as abuses of workers' rights and production using toxic metals. Like other modern social movements, however, freegan.info is heavily dependent on technology. Decisions are made via e-mail, events publicized through the group's website and online social networks, and media visits coordinated by telephone. While one or two core members of freegan.info have elected not to own cell phones, others more often see this as a frustration and a barrier rather than a model of consistent, ethical living.

The simple interpretation of these contradictions would be to use them to dismiss freeganism as nothing more than a lifestyle fad among privileged middle-class individuals too enamored with the comforts of consumerism to seriously attempt to put their ideology into practice (see e.g. Heath and Potter, 2004). There are, indeed, individuals for whom these disconnects seem difficult to reconcile. Barbara is a high school teacher in her mid-forties whose mannerisms and style of dress give little indication of her participation in freeganism. Although Barbara has been active with freegan.info since shortly after its inception, and often acts as its de facto media spokeswoman, her continuing connections to the non-freegan economic world are particularly apparent. As she notes, 'I've saved my money and I haven't bought crap all my life, so now I have a lot [of money]', which she has used to purchase both a house in Queens and one in upstate New York, where she hopes to retire. Her house in the city is far enough from her school that it is difficult to bicycle or take public transportation; she compromises by driving her car half-way and taking a bus the rest of the distance. Barbara herself is clearly aware of these seeming inconsistencies:

People see the irony in what we're doing, because we as freegans are criticizing the system on the one hand and on the other hand are living off it. It's not our ultimate goal to continue living off this horrible system. But in the meantime while this horrible system exists, while we remove ourselves from it and we're not participating in it, we still do need to eat.

However we interpret these contradictions, it is evident that freeganism, as practiced by the activists within freegan.info, is far from the 'totalizing lifestyle' it is frequently represented as being. For all the dialogue within the group about 'dropping out' of consumer society, freeganism is embedded in and limited by the context of urban life in modern America.

There is, though, one domain in which freegan anti-consumerist ideology and practice closely align: most active participants in freegan.info get nearly all of their food from dumpster diving. Barbara, for her part, reported that she obtains over 95 percent of her food from scavenging, spending money only for items that she cannot find, such as cooking oil. Her case is not exceptional. Whether or not they worked, paid rent, or owned cell phones, members of freegan.info told me that they gathered the vast majority of their food through dumpster diving.⁷ Scavenging food is important enough that freegans seek out opportunities to make their commitment not to buy food apparent to others in the group: each freegan.info general meeting inevitably starts with the recounting of recent successful diving expeditions and the sharing of various finds. When one woman sent an e-mail stating that she could not come to meetings because she needed additional time to dumpster dive – lest she be forced to start buying food – the group seemed to acknowledge that this was a valid reason for curtailing her commitments to the organization.

Yet, when asked about the role that scavenging for food plays in their group, freegans almost invariably downplay it. David insisted to me that dumpster diving is not necessarily a part of freegan practice: as he explained, '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.' When describing freegan.info to individuals not familiar with the organization, the group's representatives reiterate that freegan.info holds a wide variety of events – like sewing and bicycle workshops – which have nothing to do with food, and that some events linked to food – such as wild food foraging in Prospect Park – do not involve dumpster diving. A glimpse at the group's monthly calendar, however, shows that the vast majority of freegan.info events are dumpster dives, and many of those that are not (like 'freegan feasts') involve consuming scavenged food. Thus, while many activists initially repeat that 'Freegan mentality is not just about eating for free', most will eventually agree that 'What gets us the best is food.'

On initial consideration, there is something strange about the fact that dumpster diving – not bicycling, not urban gardening, not full-time activism – is the one behavior in which every member of freegan.info engages. Direct, personal contact with any form of waste is heavily stigmatized (Douglas, 1966; Rathje and Murphy, 1992). Taking *food* from the trash is even more socially abhorrent, because food practices tend to be closely bound to cultural identity and highly resistant to change (Clark, 2004; Counihan, 2002; Jacobs, 2005; Mennell et al., 1992). Even among individuals for whom scavenging in refuse for various goods is a full-time occupation, dumpster diving for food is typically considered abhorrent (Ferrell, 2006; Medina, 2007). Duneier (1999) encountered resistance to eating from the garbage

even among the group most readily associated with the behavior: poor, homeless black men. As one of those men stated, 'I think it is degrading to look through trash, I would never go that low' (1999: 84; see also Eikenberry and Smith, 2005; Gowan, 1997).

Freegans are certainly fully aware of the stigma attached to what they do, and the barriers to participation this creates:

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.

As social movement scholars have repeatedly observed, in the transformation of ideology into action, social movements normally seek to publicly present modes of behavior that are not just consistent with members' principles but also appealing to a general audience (McCarthy, 1994; Zuo and Benford, 1991). If the *freegan.info* group's goal were to expand the practice of freeganism or to be perceived favorably, then choosing dumpster diving as their primary activity would seem illogical.⁸ Indeed, in a study on dumpster diving in France and Italy, Black (2007) found that many people used their disgust at eating discarded food as an excuse to ignore the scavengers' broader message about poverty, waste, and over-abundance. As I suggested in the introduction, NSM theory might interpret dumpster diving, like other NSM tactics, as driven by an 'expressive rather than strategic logic' (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 292). The remainder of this article suggests how dumpster diving can also function towards traditional social movement goals like gaining new recruits and media attention.

Political theater on the sidewalk

Having set up one possible explanation for the centrality of dumpster diving practice, I now offer an alternative, grounded in the approach of social dramaturgy developed by Goffman (1959). Social dramaturgy focuses on the strategies individuals use to portray their identity in stylized ways, a process Goffman (1959: 231) labels 'impression management'. Teams of actors, in turn, combine performances in order to 'influence the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate' (1959: 15). While Goffman himself cautioned against taking the theatrical analogy too far and assuming that all actions are staged and deliberate, his framework provides a useful way of 'ordering facts' (1959: 233) and making sense of how individual identity translates into collective action.

Certain features of *freegan.info*'s dumpster dives immediately suggest the value of viewing them as performances. In their study of Australian freegans, Edwards and Mercer (2007) noted that dumpster divers operated surreptitiously and in small numbers. In stark contrast, *freegan.info* holds dives in large groups at specific times and places, which are openly advertised on its website and activist list-serves.

One freegan explained the reasoning behind holding public ‘trash tours’ to me in pedagogical 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, right, 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.

Freegans reported that, on their own, they could gather more food in less time, but they choose to dive with the group anyway.

These dumpster diving events are usually attended by around 20 people, almost half of whom are newcomers, many of which will not return for a second trash tour. Freegans recognize that they have a limited window of time in which to present their movement to newcomers, and can show only part of the vast repertoire of freegan practices in their performance. These kinds of choices, Goffman argues, are guided by the realization that audiences are always looking to find ‘chinks in [the actor’s] symbolic armour in order to discredit his [*sic*] performance’ (1959: 66). Considering this, dumpster diving presents an easily manipulated medium through which freegans can represent their broader anti-consumerist, anti-capitalist ideology in a compelling and appealing light.

Institutions serving or selling food are among the most abundant forms of businesses in New York City, and are sure to produce a continual supply of garbage as items expire or ‘go bad’.⁹ In New York City, garbage is picked up every night at regular hours, and is generally placed on the curb of the public sidewalk, rather than on private property. This regularity of grocery stores’ garbage output ensures that the freegans find a predictable array of items on a given night. The freegans do not take any chances with this, though. Before inviting newcomers to go dumpster diving in a previously unexplored neighborhood, they first hold a ‘trash trailblaze’ to determine which stores throw away the best food. By doing so, they guarantee that when individuals unfamiliar with freeganism join them in a particular area, they will be able to show them a great deal of waste – as well as a variety of edible items – in a short period of time.

While freegans in Australia choose locations for dumpster dives based on ethical considerations, such as which stores’ suppliers have the worst labor or environmental practices (Edwards and Mercer, 2007), freegan.info chooses sites based on their relative effectiveness for presentation. Most trash tours involve three or four stops, one of which is nearly always a local bagel shop or bakery. While these small stores are hardly the evil multi-national corporations that freegans most disdain, the reasoning behind this selection is clear. Most bakeries throw out their entire stock at the end of the day, and typically place all their food items together. Even reluctant trash-tour attendees rarely can resist reaching into a clean trash bag to grab an (often still warm) muffin, bagel, or donut.

More broadly, the freegans choose times and places for trash tours that are conducive to public presentation. Events are generally held between 8 and 10 p.m., which is 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, where a majority of them live. Yet nearly all events are held in Manhattan in affluent, busy neighborhoods, such as the outskirts of New York University. In fact, over half of the events I have attended in my months with the group followed a carefully rehearsed route in one particular neighborhood of lower Manhattan. There, as one freegan noted, the trash is 'reliable' and the upper-class residents are thought to be more receptive to the freegan message.

Dives themselves are anything but free-for-all. Before group leaders exhort 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. The first is that individuals diving out of necessity – typically, homeless or indigent men – take precedence, so if the trash tour encounters other dumpster divers, they are allowed to finish first. The second rule is that goods are first offered for group activities, like communal freegan feasts, and can be claimed by the individual only once rejected for this purpose. As one greeter admonished the group, '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.' A final rule is that trash bags should be opened from the top – rather than ripped apart – and areas in front of stores should never be left as a mess. Once again, this rule has emerged from careful calculation: as one freegan 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.'

These 'rules' of dumpster diving illustrate how – as argued by Goffman – the performance of identity combines the strategic and expressive, blending what appears to be 'authentic' morality with 'contrived' performance. The freegan insistence on sharing, for example, is not only a 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 seek to avoid the kind of confrontations with store owners that are increasingly taking place in the UK, where managers lock dumpsters to deter 'bin divers' (Stuart, 2009). This entente is practically beneficial, since it ensures that freegans 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, since it allows the freegans to focus on their opposition to impersonal corporations, rather than small business owners with whom much of the public is broadly sympathetic.

Twenty people searching through trash on public streets is, unquestionably, an uncommon sight within the New York urban landscape, and it is difficult for passer-bys not to take notice. On one occasion, a pedestrian asked Jennifer what she was doing; she responded, 'We're showing people all the good things that get thrown away.' To her, the trash tour was about 'showing', not acquiring, and the audience was anyone she could see. Goldstein (2004) conceives of such urban spectacles as modes of asserting alternative identities and lifestyles, one example of the 'politics of recognition' that have supplanted the 'politics of redistribution' in post-socialist political action (Fraser, 1995; Young, 1990). Part of the impact of the freegan trash tour, however, stems from the way freegans merge recognition with redistribution. Freegans approach bystanders not just with flyers and movement literature, but also with scavenged food items. On one instance, a freegan planted himself in the sidewalk and started handing avocado sandwiches to unsuspecting passer-bys. During another event, labeled a 'freegavaganza', the group split up into teams of two, spread throughout the city to dive, and, at a predetermined time, returned to a park in Manhattan. There, they created a huge mound of dumpster-dived items – ranging from soy yogurt to designer shoes – and handed them out, using 'redistribution' of waste as an excuse to introduce unfamiliar people to the wider message of freeganism.

One of the most critical facets of the political theater of a trash tour is that the line between performer and spectator is mutable: if the freegan message is effectively conveyed, a passer-by can quickly become a participant. This ease of participation is one advantage of making dumpster diving central to freegan.info's activities. As Graeber (2004) points out, radical groups generally realize that few people in society are willing to adopt their ideology wholesale, and as such focus on guiding people towards concrete forms of action that are at least consistent with movement philosophy. Nancy offered an almost identical explanation for the value of dumpster diving:

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 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.

While few people confronted with freeganism for the first time will respond by quitting their jobs and renouncing capitalism, in my experience a sizeable proportion will spend a few minutes looking over scavenged food items offered them. A smaller number will leave their e-mail address with a group organizer and come to a later event. These kind of informal interactions are, by my observation, the most effective means the group has for recruitment. Tellingly, as I aim to demonstrate in the following sections, freegan performers prioritize these piecemeal increases in awareness and participation among the general population over than an ideologically pure portrayal of freegan identity.

Performing on camera

Passer-bys are not the only targets of freegan performance: the mass media is also a critical audience. A wide swathe of literature has noted the steadily increasing importance of the mass media for disseminating and legitimating social movement claims (Amenta and Young, 1999; Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Molotch, 1979). Unlike traditional social movements, however, NSMs are thought to not just interact with the media but also 'be the media' themselves (Atkinson and Cooley, 2010: 322; McCarthy, 1994; Melucci, 1989). Partially in line with this observation, freegan.info is embedded within a network of radical organizations in New York that use alternative, do-it-yourself media outlets, like Indymedia, to publicize events and communicate messages. Nonetheless, freegan.info's most significant exposure to the general public comes through mainstream, for-profit media, which has shown a surprisingly enduring interest in the movement. Indeed, at every event I've observed at which the freegans have allowed media, journalists of one kind or another have been present. On one tour, we were joined by a film crew from Spain, two writers for a magazine in Norway, and a freelance photographer from the Netherlands – an instance that suggests 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'.

The ambivalent and contradictory way freegan.info perceives and relates to the mainstream media is clear from the views and actions of David, a freegan whose 'anarcho-primitivist' philosophy – he rejects industrialism and celebrates a hunter-gatherer existence – makes him one of the group's more ideologically extreme members. David started dumpster diving over a decade ago, was one of freegan.info's founders, and now lives in the freegan.info office, where he handles many of the group's administrative tasks as well as manages several other animal rights and environmental groups. He proudly states that he doesn't have to pay any taxes, because he has no income. In many ways, David comes closest among freegan.info participants to aligning his wide-sweeping anti-capitalist principles with his daily life. Perhaps as a result of this radicalism, David seems to embody Graeber's (2009: 438) observation that 'anarchists tend to abhor the corporate media'. In fact, David told me that he thought freegan.info should impose a complete moratorium on contact with the media, claiming that corporate news outlets are inherently exploitative and do little more than portray freegans as 'weirdoes with garbage'. At the same time, David's radicalism also means that he is frequently featured in media stories about freegan.info, a role he seems to readily accept. David willingly devotes a substantial amount of time to handling media requests. At freegan.info's 'media spokesperson training', he demonstrated the depth of his experience with reporters and talk-show hosts, discussing the value of framing messages in positive language and offering consistent sound bites. When I pressed him about these apparent inconsistencies, David admitted, 'I'm not as worried about them [the mainstream media] portraying us as crazy as I am worried about them just ignoring us.'

Even as the group debates whether it or not it *should* relate to the media, then, freegan.info continues to make interaction with the media an explicit part of its strategy. Barbara explained to me the rationale behind this choice:

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.

The willingness of the freegan.info group to talk to the media sets it aside from some other freegan groups, and is almost certainly the main reason why their organization has received comparatively more attention:

We're probably the most organized freegans in the world, because we're really willing to talk to the media. And 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 on them, 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 ruin our garbage. They're going to ruin our source.' Not all freegans want to talk to the public about it.

After a New York City television news show following the freegans broadcasted images of a major chain store's waste, that chain changed its practices for dealing with overstock. From the perspective of reducing waste, this was a significant victory for freegan.info. It did, however, make dumpster diving that store more difficult, a shift about which some other dumpster divers in the city – and freegans around the world – complained vociferously. This incident is revealing because it represents a case in which freegan.info participants seemed willing to risk their authenticity in the eyes of other activists – as well as jeopardize a key source of dumpstered food – in order to achieve a tangible form of social change. In this instance, movement strategy appeared to take precedence over individual identity and expression.

As this example further demonstrates, freegan.info does not just passively accept media coverage, but actively uses the media towards collectively defined ends. This manipulation of the media, however, is coupled with accommodation. Once journalists have been scheduled for an event, that event is almost never cancelled. One night, the group debated whether to abort a trash tour planned to take place after a general meeting due to sub-zero temperatures. When they confirmed that a television crew would be coming, however, they decided to go on and dumpster dive amidst largely frozen garbage. In 2008, celebrity talk-show host Oprah 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 Nancy – a former corporate communications manager, who left behind a six-figure salary when she quit her job to become a full-time activist – to appear on the show, even though they expected Oprah's coverage to be shallow and to ignore the freegans' anti-capitalist message. The chief benefit the group hoped for, I was told, was that the appearance would lead even more media outlets to pick up the story.

The freegans' efforts to garner positive coverage 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 one freegan eventually grudgingly agreed. Barbara once told the story of a French media crew which 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 by the media further, said that he couldn't 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 bagel, putting on a tie, and going into the subway. As it turned out, though, that freegan was actually unemployed, but had wanted to show the media that freegans could have 'normal' lives despite dumpster diving. His entire performance that morning, then, was put on to avoid disrupting the façade he had created.

Events themselves are structured to control the image of freeganism that the media is able to document. One example is freegan.info's strictly enforced rule against eating in front of cameras during trash tours. This rule appears out of place in a group that rejects almost all conventional norms of food hygiene. When outside observers are not present and the freegans are in what Goffman (1959: 112) would call the 'backstage', the freegans eat straight from the trash with relish, often holding long conversations about group strategy while clustered around a grocery store compost bin. Their rule against eating on camera, however, is born from experience. A few years ago, an NYU student followed the group for several months, claiming to be preparing a documentary on freeganism. When the film was screened, 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. Barbara recounted, 'You could almost hear the audience going "ewww" when [one freegan] ate a rotten-looking strawberry straight from the trash.' While the freegans want to challenge popular food ways, they also want the media to portray freeganism in an appealing manner, and, as one of them bluntly put it, 'We just look dumb [when eating straight from the trash].'

According to Goffman, the designation of roles is one key way of sustaining a given definition of a situation through social performance. Analogously, the message of a trash tour is constructed by freegans acting not just as dumpster divers, but in more specific roles. At group meetings before trash tours, at least one freegan is delegated to keep the sidewalk clear, preventing the group from obstructing and antagonizing passer-bys. Another is assigned to give a welcome speech, laying out the rules for the tour and reminding the media not to photograph anyone without permission. One is designated the 'media wrangler', whose

role is to carefully control to whom the media talk and what they photograph. Freegans are wary of allowing impromptu interviews during trash tours because of the varying levels of knowledge and involvement of attendees. While core group members know to stick to a few central talking points – that freeganism is more than just dumpster diving, or that freegans seek to build alternative systems for providing for people's needs rather than simply living off the waste of the current system – others do not. The wrangler is assigned to make sure that the media doesn't 'corner' a newcomer – who might have no idea what 'the message' is – and represent their views as those of freegan.info. These modes of interaction with the media only serve to highlight the structured and strategic nature of freegan.info dumpster dives.

'Waving the banana': Constructing an appealing message

Of all the roles that freegans adopt on a tour, the most important is delivering the 'Waving the banana' speech. As Goffman notes, within social performances, there is often a disconnection between expression and action: performances alone are not always self-explanatory (see also Goldstein, 2004). Independently, a group of individuals gathering food from the trash does not obviously translate, in the mind of an observer, into a condemnation of consumerism: if anything, it shows a lifestyle that is entirely dependent on capitalism. The 'Waving the banana' speech bridges image and ideology by giving freegans a chance to lay out the reasoning behind dumpster diving, talk about the range of freegan practices not showcased on a trash tour, and exhort attendees to become more involved in the movement. 'Waving the banana' is an important enough role that it is usually reserved for only long-time freegan.info members; newer, less experienced participants must practice giving the speech on nights without media.

Rather than attempt to describe the typical content of a 'Waving the banana' speech, I reproduce a short speech by Sheena – a pierced and tattooed Hispanic mother in her mid-twenties, who initially became involved in freegan.info when the group provided support for her 'rent strike' against an abusive landlord – in almost its entirety below:

We're going to just talk about why all this is happening. [...] 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 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, the moment that you pull the money from your pocket and give it to the capitalist exploiters, the moment when you are being exploited is the only moment that any of these things

have any value, and obviously that's not true. It's a really fine line between use value, 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.

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. We're here to reclaim all this, because we view this as wealth. What it is is [*sic*] that 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. [...] 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.

In over 50 trash tours with the group, I observed certain patterns in the delivery of the speech that betray the intentions and reasoning behind it. The speech is almost always given at the first stop of the tour, when attendance is at its highest. Before it begins, the leader of the tour 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 they do when dumpster diving on their own. As David 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. The display is a crucial element of the speech, because it provides props that emphasize the point the speaker is making and highlight the primary critiques freegans make of consumer society. Consequently, if the props are unavailable at one spot, the freegans move on.

The orchestrated nature of 'Waving the banana' is also evident in the speech's content. As part of my research, I used open coding to monitor which terms – such as 'commodification', 'factory farming', or 'freeganism as a worldwide movement' – appeared most frequently in speeches. The contrast between the 'front stage' of the trash tour and the 'backstage' of freegan meetings and private gatherings was readily apparent. While nearly every speech mentioned freegans' 'opposition to the food system', and many referenced 'opposition to "the system"', far fewer referred to 'opposition to the *capitalist* system [emphases mine]'. Topics like anarchism, a critique of private property, and the potential merits of shoplifting and other forms of 're-appropriation' were almost completely absent, despite being frequent subjects of internal group discussion. By far and away, the most central topic of 'Waving the banana' speeches is waste: its immediate causes, the problems it creates, and ways to address it. Although I reviewed literature earlier that suggested

that an emphasis on eating wasted food ought to be the *least* appealing component of the freegan message, to the group itself, waste is their key selling point. During my interviews, I interrogated each informant about what they saw as the appeal of freeganism. While each saw him or herself as being drawn to freeganism for a complex of ideological and political reasons, most of my informants articulated that *others* were drawn to freeganism by concerns about waste. Jennifer described waste as a universal bad: '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, Barbara told me that freeganism 'makes sense [...] because waste is offensive to almost everyone'. Even David admitted that the most appealing thing about freeganism is the notion that an anti-waste, pro-repair ethic is a traditional American value (see e.g. Rogers, 2005; Strasser, 1999).

My own observations suggest that the freegans' analysis – asserting the primacy of concerns about waste for freegan recruitment – is accurate. The very idea of waste implies improper use, and as a consequence there is an inevitable degree of 'psychological discomfort' (Scanlan, 2005: 22) attached to seeing a functional item in the trash. This fact leads Rogers (2005: 16) to posit, 'If people saw what happened to their waste [...] they might start asking difficult questions.' The point of a freegan trash tour, of course, is precisely that: to render the waste intrinsic to the system of consumption visible. In this context, however, 'waste' is not just a set of objects, but a label that can be applied to different aspects of society that are perceived to be unfair or inefficient. As such, the trash tour is an event onto which different individuals can ascribe their own meanings. 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 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 like himself in the pursuit of 'wasteful' profits. Another passerby, upon hearing the freegans' justification for dumpster diving, adopted the same terminology to assail the 'wasteful' wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In each case, individuals were able to take the freegan message against waste and twist it into something with which they could directly relate. While freegan *events* are planned and structured, then, the freegan presentation of a trash tour leaves the movement's ideology remarkably open and mutable. Freegan.info has no mission statement, manifesto, or written goals. While some freegans frame the 'Waving the banana' speech's ambiguity in terms of respecting people's abilities to come to their own conclusions, others realize that by avoiding a clearer ideological platform freegans make it easier for potential participants to see freeganism as consistent with their own values. Nancy, speaking from her professional experience in advertising and communications, told me that she fears that 'the vocabulary of ideology gets in the way of relating to people'. A good speaker, she explained, finds ways to 'slip in the message' and critique capitalism without referencing it explicitly.

This helps explain why the freegans have been so much more successful in attracting a diverse audience, both within the media and the general public, than myriad other groups with similar ideologies within New York City. Freegan.info seeks to be, as one put it, 'the friendly face of anti-capitalism'. This image has been carefully cultivated over time. Like those presentations documented by Goffman, an effective freegan performance requires a great deal of discipline, because participants must refrain from expressing some of their more radical views. Jennifer told me that the 'Waving the banana' speech 'used to involve a lot more waving', but now is more of a 'Holding the banana' speech in which speakers focus on statistics about waste and rational arguments rather than anti-capitalist tirades. She noted the difficulties of reconciling personal ideology and public appeal:

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.

These calculations highlight the fine line freegans try to walk – sometimes unsuccessfully – between expressing their self-identification as radical activists while simultaneously making their movement appealing enough to attract coverage, draw in new members, and make food waste and overconsumption salient public issues.

Putting freeganism in context

Existing literature on freeganism (Edwards and Mercer, 2007; Gross, 2009) presents a movement whose activities are, broadly, similar to those of other 'drop-out' subcultures and communes, whose 'very existence' is a 'challenge to the rest of society' but whose day-to-day behavior is not guided by any strategic logic of political engagement (Kanter, 1973: 287; also Clark, 2004; Grigsby, 2004). These works explain dumpster diving as one among several strategies – such as squatting, wild food foraging, and voluntary unemployment – that freegans use to 'construct their identity in order to oppose mainstream Western societal norms' (Edwards and Mercer, 2007: 288). To speak of freegan.info as a 'sub-culture', however, would imply a unity and totality to freegan practice that masks the diverse ways freeganism does – and doesn't – penetrate into different parts of individuals' lives. For freegan.info, dumpster diving is not just one practice among many. It is the central activity around which the group comes together to create what I have conceptualized as a social movement.¹⁰

I use the 'New Social Movement' label to describe freegan.info fully aware that NSM theory has, to some extent, fallen out of favor. One strand of criticism is that NSMs do not really capture anything 'new', but instead represent one phase in recurring cycles of protest (Pichardo, 1997; Tarrow, 1998). Some NSM scholars seem to have responded to this criticism by reifying NSMs into the complete

opposite of traditional social movements: cultural rather than political, expressive rather than strategic, driven by personal identity rather than social change. Yet NSM theory, as propounded by Melucci, was never intended to be a rigid set of statements about what characteristics a movement must have to be 'new'. Instead, Melucci emphasized that movements are always a *mélange* of traditional and novel elements, with NSM theory to be used as a tool to help sociologists parse out the difference between the two (Johnston et al., 1994; Melucci, 1996). With respect to *freegan.info*, highly unconventional 'new' social movement tactics are, at least in part, used towards apparently very conventional and 'old' social movement goals. NSM theory might prove more relevant to understanding contemporary mobilizations if scholars refocused on these complex and sometimes contradictory mixtures.

Freegan practices of 'downshifting' consumption, of course, are not particularly new (Grigsby, 2004). Moreover, *freegan.info* does not appear totally immune to the mainstreaming of the environmental movement, as shown by how the radical messages of the 'Waving the banana' speech have been partially repackaged in the language of 'green consumption' (Autio et al., 2009; Dryzek, 2005). What does appear novel about *freegan.info*, however, is the way that food waste is politicized and used as a tool for movement organizing. Nonetheless, in suggesting that NSM theory must consider that non-traditional modes of action can have a strategic component, I do not want to swing the pendulum back too far and suggest that *all* action is calculated and strategic.¹¹ Both Goffman and Melucci always acknowledged that identity is constructed through interaction. A complete accounting of freegan relations with passer-bys and media through dumpster diving should certainly understand dumpster diving as, at least in part, a means of expressing an alternative individual and collective identity. If this article shows anything, it is that the lines between identity construction, expression, and strategy are blurred.

While freeganism itself may appear to be a highly esoteric sociological novelty, these questions of engagement, identity construction, and strategic action speak to broader debates about the meaning of collective action in the modern era. Somewhat contradictorily, NSMs have been presented as society's response to broad economic changes – de-industrialization, the decline of socialist politics, globalization, the rise of the information economy, to name a few – and yet are themselves frequently portrayed as fragmented, parochial, and single issue (Lee, 2007). The tactics of NSMs have never quite seemed up to the challenges that sociologists claim these movements confront. Their theatrical protests are easily dismissed as just 'dramatic gestures that are devoid of any progressive political or economic consequences' (Heath and Potter, 2004: 65) and their pursuit of autonomous spaces for identity expression seems to be a distraction from movement-building and strategy (Olson, 2009). As Graeber (2004) points out, however, these sociological constructions of NSMs can become self-fulfilling prophecies that make NSMs irrelevant by definition. Both popular media and academics often put NSMs through an 'identity machine' (2004: 101) that reduces radical pro-democracy, anti-capitalist demands into requests for autonomy and respect.

Certainly, as I have suggested (though not fully developed), activities like dumpster diving are not just forms of political theater but also represent intriguing modes of ‘post-socialist’ redistribution, appropriating ‘private’ garbage for shared ‘public’ consumption.

That said, while sociologists should be careful about how our theoretical assumptions might lead us to dismiss some social movements out of hand, we should also be cautious in making statements about these movements’ long-term impacts. I conducted my fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, when the New York stock exchange was in free fall and global capitalism appeared to be under increasing strain. During this time, interest in freeganism spiked, and the projects of freegan.info to create institutions outside of capitalism took on a new sense of urgency. Over a year later, though, it is clear that capitalism is *not* on the verge of collapse, that the apocalyptic predictions of many freegans have *not* come true, and in the intervening time freegan.info has *not* succeeded in creating a parallel economy. On the other hand, a survey of recent articles in the *New York Times* suggests the extent to which non-wasting, urban gardening, squatting, and other freegan practices have gone from the social fringes into the mainstream (Dewan, 2009; Halpern, 2010; Kaufman, 2009; Kurutz, 2007; Leland, 2009; Lipinski, 2010; Navarro, 2009). Freeganism both draws on, critiques, and – potentially – inspires more mainstream movements for green consumerism and ethical food, which have attracted increasing attention from scholars and policymakers (Carlsson, 2008; Schor, 2000; Starr, 2010; Weber et al., 2008). Although freeganism presents a huge range of potential areas of study – such as freegans’ relationships to urban space, ethics with respect to animals, and performative use of objects like waste – further research should continue to focus on understanding how freegans engage with broader social forces. Whether unconventional strategies, such as those deployed by freegan.info, have had any enduring impact beyond simply proffering an alternative identity at the margins of society remains an open question.

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Notes

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
2. The term ‘dumpster diving’ does not really apply in New York City, where commercial garbage is placed on the curb for nightly pick-up instead of being left in dumpsters. This configuration of New York’s waste system has major implications for the legality, ease, and safety of trash-picking, as the individuals that are the subject of this article readily admit (for a discussion of the legality of dumpster diving,

see Thomas, 2010). Nonetheless, since ‘dumpster diving’ is the term that these individuals themselves use – in order to identify with the global freegan movement – I use it throughout this article.

3. Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/home/home.shtml> on 11 April 2010.
4. There is, to the author’s knowledge, no quantitative data on the prevalence of freegan behavior, and thus nothing that firmly establishes the phenomenon’s growth (although, see Black, 2007). One interviewee claimed to have coined the term ‘freegan’ decades ago; however, I can find no records of groups appropriating the label prior to 2000. Lack of firm data aside, a recent spate of references to freeganism within popular literature on food and waste (see e.g. Erway, 2009; Rufus and Lawson, 2009; Singer and Mason, 2006; Stuart, 2009; Weber, 2009) and steadily increasing media coverage suggest that, at the very least, freeganism is gaining much greater visibility and popular recognition.
5. For some NSMs – such as the gay liberation movement – acknowledgement and tolerance are indeed the primary demands (Gamson, 1991). However, I argue that to assume that *all* movements which appear to fit the parameters of NSMs seek only recognition is overly limited.
6. While perhaps, to some extent, freegans opt not to put their ideology fully into practice because of psychological or social barriers to completely dropping out of mainstream life, the physical, economic, and legal configuration of New York City makes squatting almost impossible. While freegans reported that in Barcelona, police largely left squatters alone, the New York Police Department actively seeks out and evicts squatters. Land values are so high in New York that few buildings remain unoccupied and standing for long. Even when a wave of squatting swept the United States in 2009 (Leland, 2009), the situation in New York City still made squatting – as one freegan described it – ‘unsafe and unstable’.
7. NSM theory suggests that activists within NSMs are not bound together by traditional cleavages – like class or race – but instead their identification with the cause of the movement itself (Carty and Onyett, 2006; Offe, 1985). This certainly seems to be the case with freegan.info: members of the group do not share any clear demographic characteristic, but do have in common their participation in dumpster diving.
8. This claim is supported by an informal survey I conducted of 95 Princeton students about their receptiveness to adopting various freegan behaviors. Compared to other freegan practices – like eating vegetarian, bicycling, or drastically reducing energy consumption – respondents indicated that they were much less likely to consider dumpster diving, even if they believed it had the same positive environmental impact. Eighty-five percent stated that they thought dumpster diving was socially unacceptable, and 94 percent agreed that most dumpster divers were poor, unemployed, or homeless.
9. In reality, much of the food recovered by freegans is not ‘bad’ at all. Many items the freegans collect were thrown out because the store over-ordered and could not sell its stock or because the packaging was damaged, not because the items were actually unsafe to eat.
10. Although in this conclusion, I draw contrasts between my understanding of freeganism and that of previous studies, I am not asserting that these authors were incorrect. One of the most important themes that emerged from my research was the diversity of freeganism as it is understood and practiced worldwide. Thus, this conclusion could simply reflect the distinctiveness of the New York freegans.

11. For a critique of the Resource Mobilization paradigm – which interprets collective action primarily in terms of rational calculation and organizational logic – see Lee (2007).

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