

‘Waving the Banana’ at Capitalism: Activist Identity and Political Theater among New York’s ‘Freegan’ Dumpster Divers

Alex Barnard
Oxford University

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Abstract

This paper draws on a participant-observation ethnographic study of ‘freegans,’ individuals who use strategies like dumpster diving 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 participants’ lives, I show that, in practice, freegans emphasize what would seem to be the most repellant aspect of their movement: eating discarded and wasted food. New Social Movement theory explains puzzles like these by viewing such behaviors as non-rational expressions of activist identity which are intended to assert difference rather than make more traditional social movement claims. Through the lens of social dramaturgy, I engage with New Social Movement theory by arguing that activities like dumpster diving can actually be used to project a favorable image of movement organization, recruit new participants, and achieve a positive portrayal in the mainstream media.

Key Words

dumpster diving, New Social Movement, freeganism, social dramaturgy, waste, activism, identity, consumerism.

One night in New York City

On one night in December 2007, Andrew,¹ a man with a thick mane of black hair and overgrown beard, dressed in a stained, oversized hoodie and torn jeans, roots through trash bags outside a supermarket in Manhattan, New York City. 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 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 where at least some out of a homeless population of 36,000³ rely on wasted food to survive. After Andrew pulls out a few discarded food items, 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, ten-minute speech indicting mass-consumption and capitalism. Items which a few minutes before had seemed destined to join the 96 million pounds of food taken to landfills in the U.S. each year (Kantor, et al., 1997) are suddenly imbued with political significance. A bruised tomato acts as a vehicle to lambast labor practices on corporate farms; a discarded carton of eggs open up an opportunity to attack factory farming; organic lettuce provides a medium for a tirade about ‘green consumerism’—the notion that capitalism can be ecologically sustainable with minor changes to buying practices (Rogers, 2005). The speech—which Andrew 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, Andrew’s speech attracts the rapt attention of over twenty people, a racially

diverse group ranging in age from high schoolers to retirees. These onlookers hold professions as varied as school teachers, postal workers, and full-time activists. Moreover, despite a temperature below ten degrees Fahrenheit, they are joined by camera crews from a Norwegian news network and an American cable television channel. Clearly, this sidewalk protest is situation laden with sociological incongruities, not the least of which being that neither Andrew nor the majority of the individuals foraging with him are homeless or poor.

Instead, these individuals are ‘freegans,’ a label adopted by a growing movement of individuals worldwide who share disaffection with the mainstreaming of the environmental and animal rights movements and skepticism of corporate and popular ‘green-washing.’ 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 social movement and community activism.⁴ 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.

‘Freegan’ is a combination of the words ‘free’ and ‘vegan,’ and the philosophy behind it is a fusion of both. While vegans protest animal exploitation by abstaining from consuming animal products, freegans protest capitalism by, ideally, abstaining from consuming anything that must be purchased.

While freegan ideology appears to be totalizing and absolute, most freegans emphasize certain practices while downplaying others. For some, freeganism is a way of supporting a radical activist lifestyle; for others, it is a way to reduce waste and save money. Explaining the logic behind choices of specific freegan practices is the key puzzle addressed

by this article. In addressing this question, I conceive of freeganism as a ‘New Social Movement’ (NSM), a label that emerged in the 1960s to describe post-modern, post-industrial mobilizations, primarily among middle-class populations, centered on quality of life issues (Boggs, 1986; Eder, 1990). Unlike traditional social movements, NSMs are skeptical of formal politics as means of achieving change (Tourraine, 1981; Offe, 1985). Instead, they work to politicize fields of behavior—such as, in the freegans’ case, food consumption and waste—previously free from contention (Tarrow, 1994; Teske, 1997).⁵ The primary aim of NSM mobilizations is to stimulate ‘radical questions about the ends of personal and social life’ (Melucci 1989: p.12) and generate new meanings, symbols, and lifestyles (Melucci, 1996; Tourraine, 2004).

A central question within NSM theory is whether these unconventional movements have any long-term impact (Pichardo, 1997). Evaluating the significance of NSMs is difficult because their actions often seem to have a ‘non-rational focus on identity and expression’ (Gamson, 1991: p.37). In fact, some theorists have concluded that NSMs are primarily concerned with protecting the right to choose an alternative lifestyle and to be left alone (Foweraker, 1995; Cerulo, 1997; Teske, 1997), which seems to limit their capacity to achieve systematic change (Kauffman, 1990). Under this conceptualization, NSMs are more concerned with making claims than seeing them realized; efficacy is simply not a key consideration in the choice of tactics (Melucci 1989).⁶ Most recently, elements of NSM theory have been applied in describing the protests against the World Trade Organization and other international financial organizations that emerged in the late 1990s (Wieviorka, 2005; Della Porta, 2007). As this ‘anti-globalization movement’ has ebbed, some scholars have argued that by choosing ‘identity’ over ‘interest’ and focusing on autonomy, self-organization, and private space, these NSMs struggled to offer a coherent critique of

globalization or viable alternative (Kaldor, 2003; Langman, 2005; Waterman, 2005; Smith and Bandy, 2005).

This paper engages with these debates within NSM literature by examining the relationship between dumpster diving, activist identity, and political claims within the freegan movement. I draw upon my own eighteen-month ethnographic study of the group "freegan.info", which included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of key freegan documents and communications. I attempt to chip away at the rigid divide posited in NSM literature between expressive, identity-based activism and more traditional forms of contention, which seek to build movement participation and make material demands. Drawing on the work of Goffman (1959), I argue that activists can perform their identities—by many accounts, a key facet of NSM collective action—in a way that is strategically calculated to garner media attention, attract new adherents, and make concrete demands.

I begin my argument by reviewing the existing literature on scavenging and freeganism, which treats freeganism as a totalizing lifestyle. I show that most freegan.info participants actually 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 means of collective action. In analyzing dumpster dives as acts of political street theater, however, I demonstrate how freegans structure these events in order to offer a compelling critique of capitalism which appeals to non-freegans and the media. I close by offering a reconsideration of both NSM theory and academic thinking about issues of waste.

The boundaries of freeganism

Previous studies that refer to freeganism have suggested that the phenomenon is best understood not as a social movement but as one manifestation of a vast, scavenging subculture (Ferrell, 2006). Scavenging is, in this formulation, a ‘totalizing lifestyle’ that influences every aspect of a participant’s life (Gowan, 1997; Medina, 2007). In their study of one group of self-identified freegans in Australia, Edwards and Mercer (2007) note that, although dumpster diving is a key part of freeganism, freegans engage in a wide set of practices. In fact, freegans are not just identifiable based on their behaviors, but also on their ‘dress, lifestyle politics, and whom they socialize with’ (Edward & Mercer, 2007: p.284). As in other subcultures, participants are driven not just by political goals but also a desire for community and fun (Fincham, 2007), and their aim is not so much to recruit new members but to ‘bring all parts of life into harmony’ (Kanter, 1973: p.263; Berger, 1981) with that subculture’s central ideology.

The activists of freegan.info would almost certainly agree with this description; in our interviews, most explained freeganism as an all-encompassing set of ideologies and practices. Freegans repeatedly told me that serious adherents to the ideology should aim to ‘drop out of capitalism completely’ and ‘spend no money.’ In their view, freegan.info served 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 an abandoned building—as the consummate act of resistance, because it creates a physical space

entirely outside of capitalism. When one freegan returned from a ‘squat tour’ of Barcelona, over fifty 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.⁷ ‘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 from high-rent Manhattan flats to purchase 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). Nonetheless, none of these spaces is truly *free*.

Like other anarchist-influenced groups, resistance to wage labor is a key component of freegan ideology (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 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. Christina—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.

There are, of course, other areas in which these same sorts of contradictions between ideology and practice surface. Although many freegans described modern technology as alienating, and told me they were acutely aware of the ethical problems of electronics production—such as abuses of worker’s rights and the use of toxic metals—freegan.info, as an organization, is heavily dependent on technology. Decisions are made via e-mail, events publicized through the group’s website and social networking sites, and media visits coordinated by telephone. While one or two core members of freegan.info have elected not to have 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 just another lifestyle fad among privileged, middle class NSM activists who are too enamored with the comforts of consumerism to even seriously put their ideology into practice. There are, indeed, individuals for whom these disconnects seem difficult to reconcile. Jamie is a high school teacher in her mid-forties whose mannerisms and style of dress give little indication of her participation in freeganism. Although Jamie 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 explains it, ‘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 once she can receive her maximum pension payment. 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. Jamie 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 the way these contradictions appear to be resolved, though, it is clear that freeganism is, in practice, far from the 'totalizing lifestyle' that it is in theory. For all the dialogue about 'dropping out' within the group, clearly freeganism remains embedded in the context of urban life in modern America.

The paradoxical centrality of dumpster diving

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. Jamie, for her part, reported that she obtains over 95% of her food from scavenging, spending money only for items that cannot be scavenged, 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. 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 scavenged food with others in the group. 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 to curtail her commitments to the organization.

Yet, when asked about the role that scavenging for food plays in their group, freegans almost invariably downplay it. Andrew 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 the group's 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 has a strong stigma attached to it (Douglas, 1966; Rathje & Murphy, 1992). Eating food from the trash is even more socially abhorrent, because practices regarding food tend to be highly traditional and resistant to change (Mennell, et al., 1992; Counihan, 2002; Clark, 2004; Jacobs, 2005). Even among individuals for whom scavenging for various goods is a full-time occupation, dumpster diving for food is typically considered anathema (Ferrell, 2006; Medina, 2007). Duneier (1999) encountered resistance to eating from garbage even among the group most readily associated with the behavior: poor, homeless black men. One of those men stated, 'I think it is degrading to look through trash, I would never go that low' (p.84; see also Eikenberry & 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 transmission from ideology into action, movement participants typically emphasize modes of behavior that are not just consistent with movement principles but also appealing to a general audience (Zuo & Benford, 1991). If the freegan.info group's goal is—like a traditional social movement—to expand the practice of freeganism or to be perceived favorably, then choosing dumpster diving as their primary activity seems illogical.⁸ As I suggested in the introduction, NSM theory might explain this apparent contradiction by arguing that dumpster diving is driven by an 'expressive rather than strategic logic' (Poletta & Jasper, 2001: p.292).

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 labels 'impression management' (p.231). Teams of actors, in turn, combine performances in order to 'influence the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate' (p.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' (p.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, Edward and Mercer (2007) noted that dumpster divers operated surreptitiously and in small groups. This represents a stark contrast to freegan.info, which holds dives in large groups at specific times and places 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 twenty people, almost half of whom will be 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 ideology to newcomers; they thus must choose from among the vast repertoire of freegan practices for 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: p.66). As I aim to show, 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 guaranteed 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 assure 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 & Mercer, 2007: p.287), to some extent 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 corporation that freegans disdain the most, the reasoning behind this selection is apparent to anyone who has ever dumpster dived. Most bakeries throw out their entire stock at the end of the day, and generally place all their food items together. Even reticent trash-tour attendees often cannot 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. 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, half of the events I have attended in my months with the group were in one particular neighborhood in lower Manhattan where, as one freegan noted, the trash was 'reliable' and the upper-class residents were thought to be more receptive to the freegan message. Events are generally held between eight and ten p.m.—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.

Dives themselves are anything but free-for-all. Before freegans encourage 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.’

The functions of these rules—within the context of a freegan ‘performance’ of dumpster diving—are manifold. By being respectful and clean, freegans minimize the likelihood that a store manager will place trash in a locked dumpster or pour bleach on food to deter further divers. The freegan insistence on sharing ensures that even newcomers to the trash tour—many of whom are tentative about actually reaching into a bag of garbage—will still be able to take food items home with them. Beyond these practical benefits, articulating these rules creates a positive first impression, showing that freegans are sensitive to the needs of the disadvantaged, live their own communalist principles through economies of sharing, and minimize their harmful impact on small business owners with whom much of the public is sympathetic. More generally, the very fact that the freegans *have* rules challenges the popular conflation of leftism and anarchism with disorder and disrespect.

Freegan performances are not held in a closed theater, of course, but in the streets. As such, the audience of a freegan trash tour are not merely those individuals who choose to attend—who, however diverse freeganism’s appeal, represent only a tiny portion of the urban population—but also passer-bys. During a trash tour, one freegan is designated to hand out fliers with information about freegan events. Most engagement, though, stems from the fact

that it's hard to walk by a trash tour and not take notice. On one occasion, Jamie overheard a pedestrian say to a companion 'Those are freegans' and responded by immediately asking the man to 'join us,' offering him some Grape-Nut Bars she had just found. A few weeks later, Christina was asked what she was doing and 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. Perhaps the most exaggerated instance of freegan outreach I have observed occurred one evening when Chris found a loaf of bread and an avocado in the trash. He then proceeded to pull out his leather-man knife and made avocado sandwiches, stepping into the middle of the sidewalk to offer them to unsuspecting passers-by.

One of the most critical facets of the freegan 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 possible explanation for why dumpster diving is so central within freegan.info's overall range of 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.

Madison 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 through scavenged food items offered them. A smaller number will leave their e-mail address and come to a later event; these kind of informal interactions are, by my

observation, a main way of group recruiting. Moreover, as I show in the following sections, these piecemeal increases in awareness and participation among the general population are more valued by freegan performers 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 increasing importance of the mass media for disseminating and legitimating social movement claims, particularly those of NSMs (Melucci, 1989; Amenta & Young, 1999; Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Freegan.info is no exception. 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.’ At every event I’ve observed at which the freegans have allowed media, journalists of one kind or another have been present.

At the same time, most freegans espouse views consistent with Graeber’s observation that ‘anarchists tend to abhor the corporate media’ (2009: p.438). Andrew¹⁰ is one of the group’s most ideologically extreme members, espousing an ‘anarcho-primitivist’ philosophy that rejects industrialism and celebrates a hunter-gatherer existence. Andrew 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, Andrew comes closest among freegan.info participants to aligning his wide-sweeping anti-capitalist principles with his daily life.

Given this radicalism, it is perhaps unsurprising that Andrew reported an intense dislike of most media coverage of freeganism. Andrew even told me that he thought freegan.info should impose a complete moratorium on contact with the media, claiming that corporate media outlets are inherently exploitative and do little more than portray freegans as ‘weirdoes with garbage.’ At the same time, though, Andrew willingly devotes a substantial amount of time to handling media requests. Precisely because Andrew is so committed and so deeply involved in freegan.info, he is frequently featured in stories about freegan.info in the mainstream media, a role he seems to readily accept. At freegan.info’s ‘media spokesperson training,’ he demonstrated the depth of his experience with the media, discussing the value of framing messages in positive terms and offering consistent sound bites. When I pressed him about these apparent disconnections between his stated beliefs and practice, Andrew ultimately admitted, ‘I’m not worried about them portraying us as crazy; I’m more worried about them just ignoring us.’

While there is substantial intellectual and ideological debate within the group as to whether the freegans *should* relate to the media, the reality is interaction with the media is an explicit part of the freegan strategy. Jamie defended this media engagement:

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 is perhaps its most distinctive feature relative to other freegan groups, and almost certainly the main reason why their movement has received the most 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 their store 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's stores changed their practices for dealing with overstock. From the perspective of reducing waste, this was certainly a victory for freegan.info, but it certainly made dumpster diving that store more difficult, a shift about which some other dumpster divers in the city complained vociferously. In the eyes of freegan.info, these other freegans were more interested in asserting difference than in achieving change, a prioritization which would be consistent with NSM theory but , clearly, freegan.info has consciously rejected.

Freegan.info does not just passively accept media coverage, but also actively seeks to accommodate journalists. Once media has been scheduled for an event, that event is almost never cancelled. One night, the group debated whether to abort a trash tour planned for 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 hold the event. 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 group went through a lengthy and acrimonious debate about whether it was ecologically unsound and ideologically hypocritical to fly someone to Chicago for an appearance on a corporate-sponsored television show. Ultimately, however, the group opted to send Madison—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 one freegan to be interviewed by a puppet, a request that seemed absurd but to which one freegan eventually grudgingly agreed. Jamie 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 aside from 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. For example, the freegans have a rule against eating in front of cameras during trash tours. The fact that the freegan.info—a group which seems to reject almost all conventional norms of food hygiene—would be so concerned about this may seem ironic. After all, when outside observers are not present and the freegans are in what Goffman would call the 'backstage' (1959: p.112) of a performance, 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 actually screened, however, it quickly became apparent that the student had created a short parody of freeganism, splicing together clips of freegans performing strange or disgusting acts. As Jamie 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 person 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, a strategy freegan.info uses actively. At group meetings before trash tours, at least one freegan is designated 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. Another freegan is designated as a ‘media wrangler,’ whose role, as it was described to me, is to ‘kick them [the media] in the shins [for requesting interviews].’ Freegans are wary of allowing interviews during trash tours because of the varying levels of knowledge and involvement of attendees. While core group members are schooled in key freegan talking points—for example, that freeganism is more than just dumpster diving, or that freegan seek to build alternative systems for providing for peoples needs rather than simply living off the waste of the current system—others are 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, a topic I explore further in the next section.

‘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 disconnect between expression and action: performances alone are not always self-explanatory, and thus might not effectively sustain a given desired definition of the situation. Independently, a group of individuals gathering food from the trash does not translate into a condemnation of consumerism: if anything, it shows a lifestyle that is entirely dependent and parasitic on capitalism. The ‘Waving the Banana’ speech fills this gap 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 only for long-time freegan.info members—newer, less experienced participants are typically only invited to 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 Lola—a pierced and tattooed Hispanic mother in her mid-twenties, who initially became involved in freegan.info as a way to provide food for her struggling family—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 worker, 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 fifty 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 Andrew jokingly described it, this is done for ‘propaganda purposes’: particularly tasty, rare, or expensive items are often 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 represent the key tenets of freegan ideology. Consequently, if the props are unavailable at one spot, the freegans move on: one night, at our first stop, the only trash that had been put out was some stale bread. The group moved on quickly, even though they almost always held the speech in front of the store.

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 ‘back stage’ 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 key parts of the freegan manifesto (‘Why Freegan’, 2000) and frequent topics of 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’ explanations for why *others* were drawn to freeganism generally boiled down to the issue of waste. Christina 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, Jamie told me that freeganism ‘makes sense ... [because] waste is offensive to almost everyone.’ Even Andrew admits that the most appealing thing about freeganism for many is the notion that an anti-waste, pro-repair ethic is a traditional American value (See, e.g., Strasser, 1999; Rogers, 2005).

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: p.22) attached to seeing a functional item labeled as ‘waste.’ This fact leads Rogers to posit, ‘If people saw what happened to their waste ... they might start asking difficult questions’ (2005:16). The point of a freegan trash tour, of course, is precisely that: to render the waste inherent in the consumer system 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 differing 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 that evening, 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 food for no particularly good reason, 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’ profit. Later that night, a man walking by stopped to ask what we were doing. After hearing the freegans’ explanation, he adopted that same terminology to attack 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, freegans leave their own ideology remarkably open and mutable during these presentations. Freegan.info has no mission statement, manifesto, or written goals. While some freegans might frame the ‘Waving the Banana’ speech’s ambiguity in terms of respecting peoples’ abilities to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions, others realize that by avoiding a clearer ideological platform freegans make it easier for others to see freeganism as consistent with their own values. Madison, 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.’ The key, she argued, is to find ways to ‘slip in the message’—to critique capitalism without referencing it specifically.

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 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 performances 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. Christina 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 ideology and 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 anarchist.’ 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 presenting strong claims—consistent with their self-identification as radical activists—and making their movement appealing enough to attract coverage, draw in new members, and gain political traction.

Identity and the politics of NSMs

Andrew once told me that the goal of freeganism was both to ‘turn capitalism against itself’ by using the waste of capitalism as a means of protest and simultaneously to ‘drop out of the system completely.’ While most freegans would see these two goals as compatible with one another, they capture two very different sides of the freegan project. Previous accounts of scavengers have emphasized their attempts to disengage with society; however, as I have argued, most freegans have not entirely ‘dropped out.’ To some extent, the fact that freeganism is not a totalizing lifestyle is a product of the practical difficulties of life in New York as well as participants’ own resistance to giving up connection to the mainstream world. As this article suggests, though, treating freeganism not as a totalizing lifestyle but a limited set of practices deployed in specific situations may be a tactical choice. *Why* freegans choose to emphasize some behaviors over others, though, is a question I believe that NSM theory—with some modification—can help us answer.

Sociologists have primarily understood NSMs as directing their collective action towards areas where ‘symbolic investments and pressure to conform are heaviest’ (Melucci, 1989: p.12)—such as food or consumption—because these spaces are the best places in which actors can assert an alternative identity. This emphasis on the presentation of identity can be seen in previous work on freeganism (Edwards & Mercer, 2007),¹¹ which suggests that the primary goal of individuals in the freegan subculture is to achieve consistency between ideology, identity, and practice. As a result, collective action is focused on ‘performing difference’ (Edwards & Mercer, 2007: p.291), and directed at the ‘audience within’ (Martin, 2006: p.800) rather than at society at large. Consequently, freegans can be understood as a modern, urban analog to rural communes, whose ‘very existence’ is a ‘challenge to the rest of society’ (Kanter, 1973: p.287; Grigsby, 2004) but whose day-to-day behavior is not guided by any logic of political engagement.

This constellation of theoretical understandings seems particularly valid when we consider the pre-eminent role that food waste plays in the freegan movement. Douglas (1966) points out that social conceptualizations of dirt and cleanliness express broad social symbolic systems: any object that trespasses the boundaries between that which is clean and that which is not is bound to be ‘condemned’; a person who does so becomes a ‘doubly wicked object of reprobation’ (1966: pp.37, 140). Edwards and Mercer draw on Douglas’ theory to argue that freegans use scavenging as a means to ‘construct their identity in order to oppose mainstream Western societal norms’ (p.288; see also Clark, 2004). As I have argued, though, these egregious violations of social norms can also be a potent way of gaining attention for causes and claims that would otherwise be ignored. By choosing arenas for collective action that are ‘presumed safe’ from contention, NSMs are able to subvert and re-appropriate popular symbols in way that attract attention and force people to take notice (Gamson, 1991: p.40).

Many critiques of modern leftist social movements have argued that tactics like dumpster diving are just 'dramatic gestures that are devoid of any progressive political or economic consequences and that detract from the urgent task of building a more just society' (Heath & Potter, 2004: p.65). Contemporary anarchist movements, argues Olson (2009), have failed to fill the political void left by the collapse of state socialism because, in their pursuit of autonomous spaces for identity expression, they have paid very little attention to movement-building and strategy. This evaluation has profound political implications, given that NSMs are seen by many as the dominant form of mobilization in the post-socialist world (Aronowitz, 1992). As Graeber points out, our sociological construction of NSMs can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which a global media and academic 'identity machine' (2004: p.101) turns radical pro-democracy, anti-capitalist demands into requests for autonomy and minority respect.

As I have suggested, though, some NSMs may not be so new after all—at least insofar as they mix unconventional tactics with the classic social movement focus on sustained contention, politicized demands, and building support among the broader populace (Loveman, 1998). While my observations only apply to one small movement in New York City, they are part of a broader sociological project of making sense of the recent proliferation of anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist movements (See, e.g., Schor, 2004; Graeber, 2008; Carlsson, 2008). A look at recent articles in *The New York Times* in the past year hints at the extent to which non-wasting, urban gardening, squatting, and other freegan practices have gone from the social fringes to the mainstream (Barbaro, 2008; Dewan, 2009; Leland, 2009; Kaufman, 2009; Navarro, 2009). Further research should analyze whether unconventional strategies, such as those deployed by New Social Movements like freegan.info, have had any enduring impact beyond simply proffering an alternative identity at the margins of society.

Endnotes

¹ All names used in this paper 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, rather than 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 paper readily admit. Nonetheless, since ‘dumpster diving’ is the term used by individuals in New York City, identifying them with a global movement of individuals gathering from the trash, I use it throughout this article.

³ Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/home/home.shtml> on April 11, 2010.

⁴ There is, to the author’s knowledge, no quantitative data on the demographics of freeganism or the prevalence of freegan behavior, and thus there is nothing that firmly establishes the phenomenon’s growth. 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., Singer and Mason, 2006; Weber, 2009; Erway, 2009; Rufus & Lawson, 2009) and steadily increasing media coverage suggests that, at the very least, the movement is gaining much greater visibility and popular recognition.

⁵ While I have highlighted above the most central components of the NSM paradigm for understanding freeganism, the freegan group I studied shows other components of the ideal-type NSM described by Melucci (1996). For example, NSMs tend to adopt non-hierarchical, non-formalized organizational structures (Pichardo, 1997), which is reflected in freegan.info’s lack of formal membership requirements, consensus-based decision-making process, and autonomous working groups. Moreover, NSMs typically combine an awareness of global issues with an emphasis on local action. Similarly, freegans engage in highly localized practices—like dumpster diving, hosting community meals, or setting up bike workshops—but assert that these behaviors are part of global resistance to capitalism.

⁶ For some NSMs—such as the gay liberation movement—recognition and tolerance are indeed the primary demands (Gamson, 1991). As I argue herein, however, to assume that *all* movements that appear to fit the parameters of NSMs seek nothing further than this is a limiting perspective.

⁷ While I suggested in the previous paragraph that, to some extent, freegans opt not to put their ideology fully into practice because of ‘psychological 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 un-occupied 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.’

⁸ This claim is supported by an informal survey I conducted of ninety-five 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 least likely to consider dumpster diving, even if they believed it had the same positive environmental impact. 85% stated that they thought dumpster diving was socially unacceptable, and 94% 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 recover were thrown out because the store over-ordered and could not sell its stock or because the packaging was damaged, not because they items are actually unsafe to eat.

¹⁰ It should be noted that Andrew left freegan.info during the course of my fieldwork. Given the depth of Andrew’s involvement and influence, however, I believe my interviews with Andrew, however, are still helpful for making sense of freegan.info more generally.

¹¹ Although in this conclusion, I draw contrasts between my understanding of freeganism and that of Edwards and Mercer, this does not mean I think that Edwards and Mercer 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, while I argue that Edwards and Mercer's framework may not apply in New York, this in no way means it is not applicable to the group of freegans in Australia that they interviewed.

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