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Alex Barnard, Marie Mourad

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From Dumpster Dives to Disco Vibes: The Shifting Shape of Food Waste

Activism

Alex V. Barnard (ORCID: 0000-0001-8470-9196)

Marie Mourad (ORCID: 0000-0003-3034-6507)

Abstract

Recent movements *against* food waste, seen as an issue in and of itself, build on a much longer tradition of movements *around* food waste, which use unsellable but still edible food—which we call “ex-commodities”—both as a material resource for activist projects and a symbol to denounce other social and ecological ills. In this chapter, we examine three movements—Food Not Bombs, freeganism, and Disco Soupe—that publicly reclaim and redistribute ex-commodified food. Despite this superficially similar activity, they attach different meanings to that food that show the shifting politicisation of food waste over the last decades. We reveal that as movements have narrowed their framings and targeted food waste specifically as a problem, they have also narrowed the horizons of what impacts tackling food waste

could actually have. Yet, it is partly through de-politicising the use of food waste that movements have gained access to policy-making and changed markets, in a context where governments, businesses, and charities have all endorsed the fight against food waste.

Key words: Ex-commodification, freeganism, anarchism, lifestyle politics, anti-capitalism, dumpster diving, Disco Soupe, Food Not Bombs

On a brisk November day in 2013, nearly one-hundred people—most of them homeless—gather in People’s Park, Berkeley, for a free, outdoor meal, cooked from excess food donated by local grocery stores in nearby squats and cooperatives by self-described anarchist activists. Five thousand miles away in Belleville Market, Paris, two dozen well-educated young people peel and chop vegetables that would otherwise have been thrown away, preparing a warm ratatouille for passers-by drawn in by the sound of disco music. Both events are possible because, in each country, these activists are able to tap into enormous streams of surplus food that would otherwise be discarded. Yet the participants in each event understand what they are doing in dramatically different ways: in the first, they identify themselves as part of Food Not Bombs (FNB), a movement which fights for food as a “right not a privilege” as part of a wider protest against war, poverty, and capitalism. In the second, members of Disco Soupe (DS) imagine that, through “conviviality” and collective cooking in public spaces, they are pushing for public policies to reduce corporate and consumer food waste. They are “interrogating”—but not overthrowing—the existing agro-food system.

Since 2010, food waste has become an issue of public concern for policy-makers, environmental non-governmental organisations, and advocates for corporate social responsibility (Mourad, 2016). Discussions over food waste have become increasingly technical, as a wide range of stakeholders debate how food waste should be measured, which actors along the food chain bear greatest responsibility, and what kind of nudges and incentives can increase donations to food waste or reduce produce left to rot in consumers’ refrigerators (Chaboud & Daviron, 2017). But if food waste may appear as an enormous ecological and social challenge, the scale of the problem does not, in and of itself, explain how the issue came to be singled out for special

attention. While activists like those in FNB have long denounced food waste as one of a host of problems within the modern agro-food system, food waste is now distinctive in the apparently general consensus around the need to address it (Cloteau & Mourad, 2016).

In this chapter, we point out that recent movements *against* food waste build on a long history of movements *around* food waste, often of a much more contentious flavour. We examine three social movements—Food Not Bombs, freeganism, and Disco Soupe—that all engage in a similar tactic: publicly reclaiming and redistributing otherwise-discarded food. Although these movements speak of food waste in general, in truth they are focused on a particular kind of excess food: “ex-commodities.” As one of us has argued (Barnard, 2016), ex-commodities are goods produced for sale which are still consumable but which are nonetheless expelled from the market into dumpsters because they cannot be profitably sold.¹ As other scholars

¹Endnotes

Appadurai (1986, p. 16) introduces the concept of “ex-commodity” to refer to “things retrieved, either temporarily or permanently, from the commodity state and placed in some other state,” but without theorizing the place of ex-commoditization in capitalism. Our use of ex-commodity has the most affinities with Giles’ (2014) notion of “abject capital” (see, also, Chapter 1 in this volume). If we take seriously Marx’s notion that capital is “value in motion” (see Harvey, 1999, p. 199), then ex-commodities are the things which must be expelled from the market to keep capital moving. This mass of ex-commodities, both external to the normal circuits of capital yet in constant relation with it, constitutes abject capital, whose future remains ambiguous. Once recovered and used to expose the waste-making processes of

in this volume (see Giles, Chapter 1) have shown, the contemporary confluence of increasing agricultural productivity, a highly consolidated food distribution market, and the weakening of some traditional public policies for dealing with food surpluses (such as stockpiling excess food or dumping it on developing countries) have combined to generate an expanding mass of such ex-commodities. In this chapter, we show how the differences between these movements stem in part from their divergent understandings of both the origins of and solutions to ex-commodification.

As we show, for Food Not Bombs, the discovery of ex-commodified food in the 1980s was, at least at first, a boon for activists who wanted to create (and feed!) communities organised around principles of solidarity, direct democracy, and vegetarianism. Like FNB, freeganism—a movement which gained prominence in the 2000s, whose participants attempt to minimise their participation in capitalism by living off ex-commodified food, space, and household goods—treated food waste as a powerful symbol of capitalism’s malfunctioning. They made it even more central to their message, however, through dumpster-diving “trash tours” in New York City. This greater media and public exposure to food waste may have contributed to growing interest in the topic by the 2010s. Over this period, participants in a new movement—Disco Soupe—looked at the same ex-commodified food and saw not a tool to overthrow the capitalist food system, but an opportunity to make it more efficient and sustainable.

All three of the movements we study have affiliates in cities around the world. However, this chapter draws on our observations of the East Bay chapter of FNB near

contemporary capitalism, “ex-commodities” thus in effect become what he calls “counter-commodities” (Giles, 2014, p. 108).

San Francisco, the group of freegans organised around the website Freegan.info in New York, and the Paris DS group. None can claim to be representative of their respective movements as a whole. However, these three sites have been central to the development of each: San Francisco saw some of the most visible conflicts between FNB and the authorities in the 1990s, New York hosted the freegan group with by far the most media exposure in the 2000s, and the Parisian DS initially coordinated the movement's expansion in the 2010s. Jumping from the U.S. to France to some extent follows attention to food waste itself, as France has been the home to some of the most prominent public policies against food waste (Mourad, 2015).

The authors cooked and served dozens of meals with these groups between 2007 and 2016. We also attended organising meetings, trainings, and conferences put on by each. Although Mourad did the majority of research with DS and Barnard with FNB and freegan.info, each author also spent some time observing and interacting at the other's primary research site, a form of "collaborative ethnography" intended to increase the "depth, breadth, and reliability of data" (Bennett, Cordner, Klein, Savell, & Baiocchi, 2013, p. 525). We supplemented our participant observation of FNB by interviewing two key organisers. We interviewed twenty-one participants in freegan.info and examined materials written by freegans. Our study of DS is complemented with nine semi-structured interviews and analysis of the group's internal documents and messages. We present the three movements in roughly chronological order, highlighting the links between them. We conclude by reflecting on the broader lessons they propose about efforts to reduce food waste.

Food Not Bombs: Free Meals against Capitalism

No movement is cut from whole cloth, and the redistribution of free, surplus goods has a long history in U.S. politics. In October 1966, a group calling themselves “the Diggers” (after a 17th century English peasant movement dedicated to abolishing private property) began distributing free food to the hippies and homeless congregating in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. Prophesising oncoming ecological doom, the Diggers called for a rapid transition away from industrialism and capitalism (Belasco, 2007, p. 18). Not content only to preach, however, they sought to construct the new, post-capitalist society they saw as necessary, creating “free stores” to distribute donated, surplus, or stolen goods and offering free medical care and housing. Across the bay, the Black Panthers were creating a series of “survival programs” to provide food, education, and health care to impoverished black communities, relying also on donations and surplus (Bloom & Martin, 2013).

Although direct lines are difficult to draw, Food Not Bombs was part of this political lineage, which linked redistribution of free goods in public space to challenges to capitalism, urban exclusion, and environmental destruction (Heynen, 2010; Spataro, 2016). The group started in 1981 as an off-shoot of movements that used non-violent civil disobedience to protest nuclear power (see Epstein, 1991). According to FNB’s website, the movement’s first act was to serve a meal outside the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston in order to “protest the exploitation of capitalism and investment in the nuclear industry.”² By serving free, surplus food in public to anyone regardless of need or condition, the group sought to differentiate itself from churches and charities as well as demonstrate how its core principles—vegetarianism or

² <http://foodnotbombs.net/faq.html> (Retrieved October 18, 2018).

veganism, consensus-based decision-making, and non-violence—could be used as the basis for a more just and peaceful world. Keith McHenry, one of the movement’s founders, told us in an interview that recovered food was an effective vehicle for this message:

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

In short, for McHenry and his friends, public meals were a way of enacting their vision for a post-capitalist food system; what allowed them to do it was ex-commodified food.

Ex-commodified food was not just useful in FNB’s visible occupations of public space, then, but also in sustaining FNB activists themselves. One morning in 2012 we jointly helped prepare a meal in “Fort Awesome,” a cooperative house in Oakland California replete with chicken coops, extensive organic gardens, and solar panels. We met Manuel, an El Salvadorian immigrant who was serving as the “bottom-liner,” the person taking responsibility for ensuring that the meal was ready on time. Manuel told us he was currently living in a squat and spending much of his time operating a free bike workshop in a low-income neighbourhood. FNB was important to him not just as a way to express his politics to others, but also for his own survival: as he explained, “We’re all political in every part of our lives. But we

also need some stability...and for that, you need a place to live, you need a reliable source of food. You have to create some kind of a structure.”

Offering free food is, for the group, simultaneously a way to bring in new participants, sustain existing ones, and show solidarity with the surrounding community. FNB chapters also serve as entry points for anarchist subcultures and communities claiming to build a new society “in the shell of the old” (Edwards & Mercer, 2007; Heynen, 2010, Giles, 2013). FNB is born of a sub-culture in which food waste was one of many different types of discarded objects (appliances, bikes, or clothes, for example) that helped activists lead lives that they saw as partly outside of capitalism (Carlsson, 2008; Clark, 2004). Shantz (2005, p. 12) observes the ethos of recovery in anarchist community spaces that participants in groups like FNB frequent:

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

FNB is thus part of what Carlsson (2008, p. 181)—describing a range of urban utopian projects across the US such as community gardens in abandoned lots, cars running on discarded vegetable oil, or bike workshops using discarded parts—calls a “politically-informed embrace of working with waste.”

The East Bay FNB chapter in which we both participated over a period of months saved hundreds of pounds of food a week of waste from the trash. The group served seven meals a week, having missed only two (owing to extremely inclement weather) in the last twenty years. It did so with little infrastructure beyond a beat-up truck used to pick up donations. Cooking was done in a rotation of co-operative

houses, meals were served on picnic benches in public parks, and who would show up on a given day was anyone's guess. As we observed, participants showed an impressive ability to work with whatever produce they recovered, which they combined with rice and beans, which the group had paid for with money accumulated by re-selling discarded furniture they discovered on the streets of Oakland and Berkeley. This kind of ingenuity was on display in New Orleans, too, where FNB managed to reach people stranded by Hurricane Katrina while large and better funded charitable organisations like the Red Cross were scrambling (Spataro, 2016).

At the same time, the group was deliberately disconnected from other efforts around food redistribution. Group members emphatically did not see themselves as working in common cause with other organisations that provide food for some of the same homeless and precarious individuals FNB targets with its meals (see, also, Heynen, 2010). At eighty-one years of age, Anne had been a regular cook for East Bay FNB since her retirement. When asked about her "volunteering", she bristled:

I don't like the word volunteer, or really charity either. I'm doing this to make a political statement... The reason we are in Food Not Bombs and not some church or charity is because we believe that food is a human right and not a commodity. We demonstrate that by serving meals and giving away food participating in the Food Not Bombs community is a meaningful and positive political act.

The group's pamphlets and its participants emphasised their "resistance to oppressive capitalist society" and commitment to "change the system," the latter understood as meaning much more than simply altering stores' wasteful practices and offering a band-aid for unequal access to food. Ultimately, for FNB, solving food waste is not the main issue. In the short term, a more efficient food system with less food waste

would even make achieving the real goals of FNB—providing “solidarity” to the destitute and supporting anti-capitalist, anti-war activists—more difficult.

What’s Contentious About Free Food?

If the activists of FNB believe that sharing free food and other rescued resources is something far more contentious than simply providing charity to those in need, the authorities have consistently agreed. In the 1990s, an offshoot of Food Not Bombs claimed to have opened up hundreds of squats in abandoned buildings and was housing up to 500 homeless people a night in San Francisco (Parson, 2010). The city arrested 325 members of San Francisco FNB over a three-year period, and the movement’s public meals and appropriation of housing that was ex-commodified and taken off the market was problematic enough to be raised as an issue in the 1995 mayoral race. As one activist we spoke with who was involved in FNB at the time recounted, when the time came for arrested FNB participants to go to court, “We would all go to the hall of injustice [the courthouse], and we all stood outside, and we were trying to hand out bagels, and the cops would confiscate the bagels. And we’d shout, ‘shame, shame, shame,’ and so we have a photograph of a pile of bagels with a bunch of cops in riot gear surrounding it.”

FNB played a role in feeding participants in the wave of mass protests against free trade and global financial institutions across the U.S. and Western Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Graeber, 2009). Among the people we met in the East Bay, for some, seeing FNB at these protests was their entry point into the movement. Carol explains that she came to Food Not Bombs “from the inside,” having spent years “eating Food Not Bombs bagels” at anti-war, anti-nuclear, and anti-incarceration demonstrations.

This anti-globalisation movement lost steam in the face of post-9/11 police suppression, but FNB has not disappeared: in fact, it claims anywhere between 500 and 1,000 loosely-affiliated chapters around the world, including nine in France. In 2012, for example, we accompanied FNB activists as they brought food to “Occupy the Farm,” an attempt to reclaim a small patch of farmland in Albany, California from impending development by Whole Foods. Somewhat paradoxically, ex-commodities from the existing capitalist food system were used to support a movement that envisioned a post-capitalist food system with neither commodities nor food waste.

< FIGURE 23.1: ‘Occupy the Farm’ in Albany, California, supported by FNB, in 2012. Source: Alex Barnard (used with permission) >

Yet even as food waste has become a public concern and organisations seeking to reduce it have received increasing recognition and funding, FNB’s own efforts to reclaim ex-commodities have faced increasing resistance because of the political message they attach to them. A 2014 report found that 31 U.S. cities had taken actions to restrict food sharing for the homeless (Stoops, 2014); some of these group feeding laws were a direct response to FNB, leading to arrests from Southern California to Florida (Heynen, 2010). Food Not Bombs provided support for the Occupy Wall Street encampments of fall 2011 (Sbicca & Perdue, 2013), which were themselves systematically shut down by the police, partly based on claims that the encampments—including their kitchens—were un-hygienic (Liboiron, 2012).

Food Not Bombs has certainly not gone away, but it is not the most prominent voice in the food waste landscape. Instead, the last decades have seen a striking increase in the prominence of “lifestyle politics” as people turn away from public protest towards individual practices (Bennett et al., 2013; Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones,

2012). While the ideological and tactical affinities between the two are undeniable, the rise of freeganism is arguably an intermediate step in the transition to making food waste a stand-alone issue whose solutions rested less in collective protest and more in individual practices.

Freegans: Diving in, Opting out

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

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

McHenry, confident that any health food store was bound to have a plethora of unsold—i.e. ex-commodified—products on hand, suggested that the group go out back:

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

Despite being vegan, McHenry thought the top-notch cheese was too good to pass up: “I called out to everyone, ‘I can’t believe I just found this cheese. To heck with being vegan, let’s be ‘freegan’!’ So that was it, where the word came from.”³

McHenry ultimately left the wheel of cheese in the dumpster, but he carried the tale of the legendary find with him. In Gainesville Florida, he told the “wheel of cheese” story at the Civic Media Center, an alternative community space. One attendee liked the word “freegan” enough to write a short manifesto entitled *Why Freegan?*⁴ While McHenry originally used “freegan” to refer only to food, the tract presents a much broader vision:

There are two options for existence: 1) waste your life working to get money to buy things that you don’t need and help destroy the environment or 2) live a full satisfying life, occasionally scavenging or working your self-sufficiency skills to get the food and stuff you need to be content, while treading lightly on the earth, eliminating waste, and boycotting everything. Go!⁵

As the author went on to explain, those choosing option 2 were engaged in the “ultimate boycott” directed against “EVERYTHING—All the corporations, all the stores, all the pesticides, all the land and resources wasted, the capitalist system, the

³ The relationship between veganism and freeganism is more complex than this joke lets on. Many freegans joined the movement after a long history of animal rights activism, and chose to move to freeganism when they realized even vegan products came with their own history of ecological devastation and exploitation (see Barnard, 2016)a

⁴ The veracity of this story was confirmed by Shteir (2012).

⁵ <https://freegan.info/> (Retrieved October 18, 2018).

all-oppressive dollar, the wage slavery, the whole burrito!” The pamphlet enumerates an array of strategies for “withdrawing from it [capitalism] and never using money,” but the most notable one is “dumpster diving” ex-commodified goods from the trash bins of commercial establishments. As the section on FNB should make clear, none of these practices was really new, but the pamphlet grouped them under a single banner.⁶

Scholars have documented self-identified freegans in cities across North America, Europe, and Australia (Carolsfeld & Erikson, 2013; Edwards & Mercer, 2007; Gross, 2009) and online freegan communities claim thousands of members. Most studies describe freegans as predominantly male, young, and coming from relatively privileged backgrounds and with high levels of post-secondary education. Although freegans vary in the extent to which they squat, hitch-hike, engage in voluntary-employment, and other strategies enumerated by *Why Freegan?* there is one common thread: nearly every self-identified freegan we talked to dumpster dives for food.

Our research focused in particular on a group in New York City organised around the website “freegan.info.” The group formed in 2003 out of the ferment of direct-action environmental and anti-globalisation movements (which themselves were fed, literally and figuratively, by FNB), and a realisation among a group of activists that trying to target individual corporate bad actors seemed fruitless. As the official freegan.info story recapitulates:

⁶ Many of these practices have now been associated with label “freeganism,” but few of the people we met in California identified with the term “freegan” and many long-term avid waste reclaimers had never even heard of it.

After years of trying to boycott products from unethical corporations responsible for human rights violations, environmental destruction, and animal abuse, many of us found that no matter what we bought we ended up supporting something deplorable. We came to realize that the problem isn't just a few bad corporations but the entire system itself.⁷

Like Food Not Bombs, then, freegan.info started out of a concern for much more than just food waste. Indeed, freegan.info experimented over time with a wide range of self-styled anti-capitalist projects, including a free bike workshop that used salvaged bike parts, “Really Really Free Markets” where discarded goods were redistributed, and sewing “skill-shares” that taught activists to repair second-hand clothes.

Nonetheless, the group is best known for its “trash tours”: publicly-announced dumpster dives that recovered still-edible food on the sidewalks outside grocery stores. While freegan.info, like Food Not Bombs, used such ex-commodified food as a resource for sustaining an activist community, trash tours made it more central as a materialization of the moral failings of capitalism. Moreover, aside from moments where the police cracked down on their public meals, FNB usually attracted little interest from the broader public. Over time, however, freegan.info events began to attract increasing media attention, which participants realised was primarily out of interest in the spectacle of wasted food and people willing to eat it not out of necessity, but as an act of protest.

Each freegan.info tour culminated with what they called a “Waving the Banana at Capitalism” speech, in which a freegan.info participant would use particular items to highlight different ills: discarded chicken to talk about animal

⁷ <https://freegan.info/> (Retrieved October 18, 2018).

exploitation, or tomatoes from Mexico to decry trade deals (Barnard, 2011). Freegan activists recognized, as Clark (2004, p. 25) puts it, that “Through the most sophisticated branding, packaging, and advertising, American food commodities work hard to conceal the labour, spatial divides, and resources that went into making the food.” Marx (1976, p. 164) classically called this process by which we are so dazzled by the useful features of capitalist commodities that we fail to see the exploited labour going into them the “fetishism of commodities.” As Cynthia, a freegan.info and animal rights activist who got her start chasing off buffalo hunters in Yellowstone explained, freegan.info trash tours were a chance to unveil these realities:

Seeing all the waste exposes very clearly the priorities in our society, that making a profit is more important than feeding people, than preserving the environment, than making use of resources, than honouring peoples’ time, labour, love, and effort. What we see with waste is that once something cannot make money, it is discarded and of no value.

Through trash tours, freegans rediscovered what ex-commodities really were, as one put it at the end of an impassioned speech:

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

Through trash tours, then, freegans were unveiling another form of fetishism: the “fetish of waste” (Barnard, 2016), by which the ex-commodities that are discarded in

the regular operation of capitalism are nonetheless hidden from us, the useful features obscured by our conviction that anything in the garbage must be dirty and useless.

< FIGURE 23.2: A ‘Waving the Banana’ Speech During a Trash Tour in New York in 2008. Source: Alex Barnard (used with permission) >

What kind of “solution” to food waste did *freegan.info* propose? On one hand, *freegan.info* was always focused on denouncing “the system”—usually going beyond “the food system” to “the capitalist system” as a whole. For years, the group decided *not* to engage in what they deemed “naming and shaming” particularly wasteful stores, out of a fear that doing so would imply that shopping at stores other than those they targeted was ethically unproblematic. Moreover, the group was frequently torn between a desire to reduce food waste and an awareness that an abundance of edible discarded food was part of what allowed some of them to survive on the margins of capitalist society while still living in New York City. At an individual level, *freegans* often insisted that perfecting personal practices had little to do with addressing the problems posed by waste, despite the great lengths many took to distance their daily lives from consumer capitalism. As Carol, one *freegan.info* activist who quit her job in the corporate world for full time activism, put it, “The point isn’t my lifestyle and how pure or impure it is. It [freeganism] is not about [taking] shorter showers. It’s about making a political point and changing hearts and minds.”

In actuality, though, *freegans* were early adopters of some of the everyday behaviours that mainstream contemporary advocates for reducing food waste now promote. Regular *freegan.info* meetings almost always started with the informal sharing of food that *freegans* had found in excess or which did not fit their specific needs. Monthly *freegan* “feasts”—shared meals prepared with only dumpster-dived food—required that *freegans* learn to cook with what they had, rather than run to the

corner store to purchase what they thought they needed. Cynthia explained how freegans were building community through food, critiquing the way that, in cities, “people aren’t treating food as social glue which sticks community together.”

Freeganism, we realised, requires spending much more time gathering, storing, and preparing food than most Western consumers are accustomed to committing to it. In evaluating food safety, freegans—like some contemporary food waste campaigns—encouraged their audiences to look beyond “best-” and “sell-by” dates. As Adam, one of *freegan.info*’s founders, told a group of students: “We have false ideas about what constitutes fresh food. A lot of food tastes better when it looks worse. But those are not the tactile and aesthetic qualities people look for when they purchase produce.” Newcomers came with a predictable range of questions about food safety, and were told by one experienced freegan, “I never look at the sell-by date, it’s irrelevant to me. It’s about the condition of the food: you smell it, you taste it, and if it’s horrible, don’t [eat it].”

Although hygiene concerns were a frequent reason for shutting down FNB’s public meals, it was precisely this “ick” factor that freegans leveraged to make their activities so attention-grabbing. Douglas (1966) argues that all societies hold powerful “pollution rules” that separate the clean and dirty, sacred and profane, virtuous and wicked. In his work on dumpster-diving punks, Clark (2004, p. 28) found that “for those...who were raised White or middle class, dumpsters and dumped food dirty their bodies and tarnish their affiliation with a White, bourgeois power structure. In this sense, the downward descent into a dumpster is literally an act of downward mobility.” For many freegans, too, dumpster diving was a way of symbolically distancing themselves from their own privileged backgrounds and, for some, past employment in mainstream, corporate jobs.

As they insisted, freegans also engaged with these “pollution rules” strategically and instrumentally. When freegans ate “polluted” food and show that it is still good, they attempted to imply that the store managers, consumers, and social norms that led to ex-commodification were, in fact, dirty, profane, and wicked, while reclaiming waste was, ultimately, clean and virtuous. The perfect example came when an ABC reporter asked, “What do you say to people who say, ‘There you are on the street, digging through trash, this is gross, this is disgusting.’” One media-savvy freegan replied: “Well, I’d say what’s gross and disgusting is the fact that this food is being thrown out in the first place.” If freegans built on the strategies for using waste piloted by Food Not Bombs, this example highlights how the group further developed the idea of using food waste symbolically and instrumentally as well to call attention to a broader anti-capitalist message. This message coexisted uneasily, however, with a set of practices that, at least to some observers, seemed like an over-the-top fixation on their personal carbon footprint and individual (non-)consumptive practices.

From Anti-Capitalism to Anti-Waste

By 2010, freegan.info claimed to have been the object of 600 news stories from dozens of countries. But the group also faced a series of problems. There were tensions within the New York group around those who saw freeganism as an all-encompassing anti-capitalist practice, and those who saw it simply as a common-sense way to eat cheaply while reducing waste. While the leaders of freegan.info wanted to publicise the existence of ex-commodified food as much as possible, other dumpster divers resented the new attention to what had previously been a discrete practice. They blamed freegan.info and the media it attracted for an apparent uptick in

frequency with which discarded food had been deliberately destroyed through pouring bleach on it or slashing it with a knife.

These observations were not limited to New York City. Jeremy Seifert, a filmmaker who released a 2010 documentary about waste at Trader Joe's supermarkets in the United States, told the authors that a few years later:

I've found a lot of locked dumpsters at some of the stores, for sure. I think they are quietly doing that to avoid more films and videos being put out. They refuse to adopt a corporate-wide policy, which means that they allow each individual store to determine their giving. Some stores might give some of the food, but don't want to deal with fruits and vegetables, so they're going to throw that away... There's probably still significant waste happening, so they're locking dumpsters to avoid the scandal of it.⁸

Outside of New York, a few dumpster divers in the Netherlands, France, and the U.K. were actually arrested for recovering wasted food (de Vries & Abrahamsson, 2012; Goutorbe, 2015; Wardrop, 2011). Although there seems to be no systematic study of the criminalisation of food recovery worldwide, O'Brien (2012) suggests that practices of gleaning and dumpster diving may become more difficult as more food waste is diverted into waste-to-energy facilities or municipal composting programs. In

⁸ The CEO of Trader Joe's has also been celebrated as a leader in helping to develop secondary markets for otherwise-discarded food, through his Daily Table store (Alvarez & Johnson, 2011). We think this is a striking example of how more formal, mainstream attempts to reduce food waste can crowd out informal food recovery practices.

effect, it may be getting harder to access ex-commodities because those ex-commodities are being re-commodified.

Indeed, one of the paradoxical impacts of freeganism's rise may be that it has made its own practice more difficult through helping call attention to food waste and stimulating actions to reduce it. In early 2014, the authors attended a conference put on by GreenCook, an EU-funded collaboration between governments, businesses, and non-profits centred on reducing food waste. The keynote speaker was Tristram Stuart, a British public activist-intellectual who, by his own narrative, first became interested in food waste through "skip dipping"—recovering food from dumpsters—in London (Stuart, 2009, p. 5). He opened his remarks by asking, "Who here has ever been dumpster diving?" We rose our hands, but the other 250 people—mostly government functionaries, corporate sustainability officers, and high-level NGO employees—looked confused. Still, Stuart himself told us afterwards that:

By taking journalists round the back of supermarkets, showing them what was there, and serving them dinner based on it, and being able to very articulately talk about how this fit into a global problem generated a lot of media. It certainly sparked a lot of interest on the part of policymakers and companies...I absolutely think freeganism was *the* original instigator of this new wave of global action on food waste.

Of course, the convergence of a global financial crisis and concerns about food supplies (see Chapter 1, this volume) set the structural stage for broader public concern over food waste. Nonetheless, since reducing food waste is not the automatic or even obvious way of addressing a growing population and rising precarity, policy entrepreneurs like Stuart and social movements like freeganism are a necessary

ingredient of putting food waste made onto the agenda (Evans, Campbell, & Murcott, 2012).

Yet even as it has grown in attention, the meanings attached to food waste have changed. For example, Jonathan Bloom (2010, pp. 11, 28) wrote in his frequently cited book *American Wasteland* that solving food waste is a “triple bottom line” solution that benefits consumers, businesses, and the environment, adding that “By trimming our waste and recovering the low-hanging fruit (literally and figuratively!), we can help feed hungry Americans, bolster our economy, combat global warming, and make our society that much more ethical.” Stuart (2009, p. 294), distancing himself from many dumpster divers’ (including, perhaps, his own) radical critiques of the food system, declared “reducing food waste” to be “uncontroversial” and “relatively painless.” Similarly, the United Nations’ Think.Eat.Save project speaks of a cultural “paradigm” that enables food waste, but assures us that “with relative ease and a few simple changes to our habits, we can significantly shift this paradigm.”⁹

These approaches are emblematic of a much-studied process of the transformation of seemingly radical environmental claims into initiatives that rely on voluntary corporate commitments, technological advances, and consumer choices (see, e.g., Bartley, 2003; Jaffee, 2012). Food waste programs treat food waste as a problem in-and-of-itself, that can be tackled on its own terms without a broader transformation of economic or even food systems. This understanding, we show in the next section, was picked up by Disco Soupe.

⁹ <https://www.thinkeatsave.org/> (Retrieved March 21, 2019).

Disco Soupe: ‘Yes we cut’

Disco Soupe has more recent origins than both Food Not Bombs and freeganism. Inspired by an event called “Schnippeldisko” (“Peeling Disco”) in Germany¹⁰—organized by youth affiliated with the global slow-food movement—the group held its first event in France in March 2012. Its stated mission was raising awareness about and encouraging non-confrontational action against food waste in a collective and participative way, creating “conviviality” through music and cooking.¹¹ The group spread quickly, holding 60 events in 25 cities between March 2012 and May 2013 and claiming around 600 active members in 2018.¹² Although not formally affiliated with one another, the concept has been adopted by self-organised groups in, among other places, New York City (“Disco Soup”), Madrid (“Disco Sopa”), São Paulo (“Disco Xepa”), Rotterdam (“Disco Soep”), and Namyangju, Korea (“Yori Gamu”).

Like freegan.info and FNB, DS acquires ex-commodified food, which would otherwise go to waste. The group mostly acquires donations directly from supermarkets or wholesalers, rather than “dumpster diving” their discards. Meals are supposed to be cooked collaboratively and served in public to anyone, regardless of need. Similarly to FNB, the group insists that these features distinguish it from more “mainstream” soup kitchens and emergency food providers. DS also claims to embody its principles by eschewing hierarchical, formal structures in favour of

¹⁰ <http://slowfoodyouth.de/was-wir-tun/schnippeldisko/> (Retrieved January 25, 2019).

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/DiscoSoupe/info> (Retrieved October 18, 2018).

¹² *Rapport d’activité, mars 2012-mai 2013 (Report of Activity, March 2012-May 2013)*, Disco Soupe, 2013. All translations from French by Mourad.

consensus-based decision-making and loosely affiliated chapters with no designated leaders or officers.

Some DS participants were even closely affiliated with the kind of anarchist, direction-action currents that gave birth to freeganism and FNB. At 26, Lea decided to stop her studies on urban planning to dedicate herself to DS. In 2014, she lived in an illegally occupied squat in the 20th district of Paris and explained that her action with DS was “political, in a certain way.” As she elaborated in a discussion on the DS Facebook group:

Distributing free food in the public sphere in a festive way is itself a form of claim: acting is not always acting *against* something, but it can consist in offering free activities that cannot be controlled. The idea of testing new systems of valuation not based on the market is political.

She even referred to the concept of “temporary autonomous zones” popularized by the global justice movement (Bey, 1985), joking that DS meals provide “temporary autonomous soup.” For a few members of DS, then, claiming discarded food and occupying public spaces with live music, outdoors or indoors, at marketplaces, in community centres or squats, and during festivals or community events, were the key aspects of DS.

Most DS organisers, despite the exceptions noted above, tended to come from similarly-privileged but less politically-engaged backgrounds than those in freegan.info or FNB. The objective of DS’s public meals was not to place blame on corporations or consumers but to raise general awareness among “citizens” and gain media attention. By inventing play-on-words like “we peel good!” and creating posters with smiling vegetable faces, some DS participants further emphasized their non-confrontational approach. As Pauline, a 30-year-old business school graduate

working for a social enterprise, explained, the value of DS events was to talk to the “average Joe” and to attract people who would not be involved in more radical forms of activism. As she herself acknowledged, “I wouldn’t do this if it were not for DS...some radical groups are too closed or badly organised... or less fun.” Sébastien, a 27-year-old journalist organising DS events, noted that DS had benefitted from broader attention to food waste issues. But, he added, “If we just talked about food waste, there would be less interest. But there is music, too.”

One of the central goals of Disco Soupe is to “raise awareness against food waste” and it joined major international organisations in pointing to consumers as key to addressing the issue. For some DS participants, the way individuals related to the food itself during the meal preparation was exemplary of how consumers could change their practices. During DS meals, people exchanged tips for cooking with leftovers or parts of vegetables like carrot tops that usually go to waste. Participating in a DS event was, for their mostly young attendees, a chance to increase their knowledge around food by discovering rare vegetables or exotic fruits that they would not usually use and learning how to cook them. The group further encouraged “food education” with special tables for children who learn how to chop with plastic knives.

< FIGURE 23.3: A Disco Soupe Meal Preparation in Paris in 2014. Source: Yann Deva (with permission) >

Some participants viewed the time spent preparing and cooking as imparting a sense of the value of food, particularly to items that would otherwise have been thrown away for cosmetic reasons. We observed one organiser voluntarily leaving some blemished parts of the fruits for participants. “The aim is to make them cut out the bad parts,” she explained, “to sensitise them.” Spring, Adams, & Hardman (2019) argue that such “visceral pedagogies” have the potential to allow individuals to re-

imagine themselves as skilled actors in assessing and preparing food, rather than being relegated to the status of passive consumers. But if the events sought to empower their participants to address food waste, it could muddle the origins of that waste in the first place. After all, DS events intended to influence consumers relied on ex-commodities produced by retailers, who were nonetheless not the direct targets of these educational efforts.¹³

Such practices of re-valuing atypical foods were not so far from the practices on view at a freegan feast, but they were intended to inform consumers' purchasing decisions in a way freegan.info events, needless to say, were not. One DS event organiser explained her discomfort with how an event might fail to raise awareness about the need to buy locally-produced vegetables: "I always feel super weird when we cook a ratatouille [a stew made with summer vegetables] in the middle of the winter. What are we communicating to these people? They still follow the supermarket standards." Reflections like this show that, in the eyes of many DS organisers, a single awareness-raising event could spark enduring changes. One woman described the first DS event she organised:

There are the small posters...but the very fact of doing a Disco Soupe speaks for itself. You are in the concrete aspects of waste...They tell you 'so many tons [of waste], so much stuff...' but then you *see* the quantities, quantities and quantities [she added gestures imitating mountains of food]. You think that all of this would not have been eaten... You spend an hour to chop: nothing can be more concrete!

¹³ We are grateful to the reviewer for this point.

She went on to explain, “Now when I chop an apple I think about this moment [saving a piece of a partly-rotten apple during the DS] and I cannot throw away the entire apple!” Disco Soupe thus appeared as an example of a “lifestyle-based movement” (Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012) of the kind freegans explicitly derided, even as both groups endorsed similar practices.

Is DS emblematic of a process of de-politicisation of food waste? DS members often debated whether or not they are “*politique*,” but in the sense that the most common meaning of the French word relates to affiliation with political parties. This point was explicitly clarified during their first “Disco Campus” (general assembly) in 2013: “we are *politique*, not *partisan*,” that is to say “political” but without party affiliation. In their eyes, public meals put positive pressure on decision-makers in government and companies. In this respect, the strength of DS was precisely that it is both well-organised enough to be taken seriously by institutions and non-confrontational enough to attract a wide array of people to its events and organising meetings. DS meals in France scrupulously follow laws and regulations regarding public events, in terms of legal structures, insurance, and permits. The same is true for how they obtain food—the group makes formal agreements with some markets and supermarkets and offers donation certificates—and food safety—“soupers” use gloves and the main organisers of DS went to a certified hygiene training.

Groups like FNB are, of course, not indifferent to food safety, and concerns about the particular health vulnerabilities of the precarious people they served commonly came up in the East Bay. Some FNB groups may even seek permits and follow hygiene requirements with the instrumental goal of avoiding the ire of the authorities. For at least some in DS, these same practices also had a tactical function,

albeit one that reflected a very different overall strategy. When debates arose about the use of gloves that generate plastic waste, Jules, who quit his job as a consultant to devote himself full-time to the group, made it clear that even if the gloves do not ensure more hygiene, “they make it visible, it’s not like washing your hands. That way passers-by see we are serious.” DS further displays its legitimacy to outside institutions through a formalised annual report and financial statements. For a time, DS even functioned with subsidies from Paris’ municipal government—a stark contrast to the decades of arrests of FNB participants by the city government in San Francisco.

Ultimately, for most Disco Soupers, solutions to food waste could be found in partnership—not conflict—with food processing and retailing companies. Pauline and Stéphanie, who both studied in prestigious business schools before participating in the founding of DS in 2012, represented DS in working groups and meetings organised by the French Ministry for Agriculture and Food during negotiations for the “National Pact to Fight Food Waste” in 2013. Reflecting on her experience, Pauline insisted that all actors involved in those negotiations—mostly large catering and retail companies along with agro-industry representatives—had “good intentions” and that the focus should be on finding solutions. “If you offer a cheap and easy solution, they [producers and retailers] are going to be okay,” she explained, “they would even pat you on the back.” She proudly observed that the Pact was an opportunity for DS to launch a formal partnership with a major French retail chain.

Although the meals they prepared shared similarities with those put on by FNB and the “feasts” organised by freegans, they also suggested that the politics around food waste had clearly shifted. One of our informants told us that when she attempted to start a new DS group in the south of France in 2013, she actually

contacted the local FNB chapter. As she reported, however, “They even came to one of our events, but we did not really talk. They are much more radical...we are not on the same wave-length at all.” A key part of the difference, we argue, is that what was once a symptom of a malfunctioning food system had become, for DS, a problem-in-itself, that could be addressed in partnership with the very institutions previous movements denounced.

Conclusion: A New World Out of / Without Waste

Even though they expended a great deal of effort trying to educate both consumers and policymakers, the leaders of Disco Soupe often looked at the masses of people who stopped by an event for a cup of free soup and asked, “What will they remember from this Disco Soupe? They are just here for fun.” One of the founders of *freegan.info* similarly lamented that the groups’ “trash tours” seemed to encounter the same quantity of waste despite years of efforts: “We’ve done so little with it [the media]. We’ve just done exposing, exposing, and exposing, and if you do that enough, people just get numb to it.” While scholars have debated whether practices like dumpster diving can in and of themselves have a meaningful direct ecological impact (Brosius, Fernandez, & Cherrier, 2013; Scheinberg & Anschutz, 2006), it is clear that none of the three groups reviewed in this chapter was actually directly putting a dent in the estimated 40 percent of food going to waste in France or the United States.¹⁴ Moreover, the contribution of each group to shifting public policies around food waste is difficult to pin down.

¹⁴ Of course, the more “mainstream” efforts to address food waste, through charitable donations or corporate social responsibility programs, have not necessarily put a

Taken together, though, these movements nonetheless offer valuable lessons, including for those focused on more operational, technical, and policy-based solutions for food waste. First, critics have noted the close imbrication between the corporate food system and an increasingly formalised system of food banks that provide an outlet for their excess (Fisher, 2017; Lohnes & Wilson, 2018). The movements we study, however, show the potential of decentralised and democratically-organised networks in recovering and redistributing food. Second, in events like “freegan feasts” and Disco Soupe street parties, we saw how “rescuing” food—by repurposing it for new recipes or performing emergency surgery to cut out rotting parts—can actually be fun. What is often presented as an ecological duty of consumers to be more responsible can also become a source of a renewed sense of mastery and skill with respect to food. Finally, all three organisations point to how reducing food waste can also be tied to attempts to rebuild community, especially in urban spaces where food consumption is frequently hurried, individualised, and done in private.

If all three movements share some solutions to food waste, though, they saw food waste itself—particularly in the form of ex-commodities, which we defined as goods that are still useful, but which are abandoned because they cannot be profitably sold—in radically different ways. For FNB, food waste provided a resource for sustaining anarchist communities on the margins of capitalism, in the same way as abandoned buildings turned into squats or vacant lots transformed into gardens. Freeganism also tapped into food waste as a valuable resource, but, to a much greater

“dent” in food waste, either. This gives some life to the critique by FNB and freegan.info participants that ex-commodities are part and parcel of modern capitalist food systems.

extent than FNB, mobilised it as a potent symbol as well. Exposing that neoliberal capitalism poured natural resources, human labour, and animal exploitation into the production of commodities only to discard them offered a visible indictment of the system as a whole. Although some Disco Soupe participants voiced similar ideas in private, they ultimately treated food waste as a problem in its own right, one which could be solved through consumer practices and public policy which contributed to incremental steps toward broader changes in the food system. FNB and freegan.info imagined constructing a new world out of waste; DS imagined keeping much the same world but taking waste out of it.

This is not to say that FNB and freegan.info did not see food waste as a problem. One critical article claimed that “[There is] a quandary inherent in the freegan movement” because “if they succeed in their overriding goal, and society ends up becoming less wasteful, the freegan lifestyle will no longer be possible” (Halpern, 2010). Most freegans and FNB participants we talked to *did* want their practices of waste reclamation to go obsolete—they were just convinced that, to do so, capitalism would become obsolete as well. The partial success of public policies against food waste in the UK and in France in the 2010s—with decreasing quantities of food being discarded¹⁵—suggests that policymakers really can address some portion of food waste without reconfiguring the food system as a whole, seemingly suggesting there was some merit to DS’s consensual approach. But as certain sources

¹⁵ *Baromètre 2018 de la valorisation des invendus en grande distribution*, Comerso, 2018. According to this study led by a food redistribution organization, 34% of supermarkets implemented actions against food waste following the 2016 Food Waste Law. Other indicators suggest that the law had a significant impact.

of food waste dry up—whether via locking dumpsters, diverting organic matter into waste-to-energy plants, or reselling “ugly” fruits and vegetables—it is worth reflecting on what other kinds of politics and movements might be crowded out.

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