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Food waste in Australia: the freegan response

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Abstract: A common problem in all affluent societies, particularly in the retail sector, is the burgeoning issue of food waste. In this, Australia is no exception. However, to a large extent, the main focus of research in Australia to date has been on food waste at the household level. This paper focuses on the previous stage in the food life-cycle and examines the freegan practice of collecting and redistributing food discarded as 'worthless' by supermarket chains, in particular. For freegans, this is an act of choice, not need, to protest against issues of overconsumption and waste. The practice of freeganism has had multiple manifestations throughout history. It represents an alternative ethics of consumption and has multiple forms, embracing such issues as pesticide contamination, excessive labour exploitation, packaging and more. This paper reports on ongoing ethnographic research into two freegan subcultures in Australia: dumpster-divers and participation in the activities associated with 'Food Not Bombs'. It complements freegan research conducted across the world while its analysis, applying theories of alternative food networks, food justice, diverse economies and concepts of autonomy, provides insights into contemporary forms of activism and social change around issues of food waste in Australia.

Keywords: freeganism, free food, waste, punk, urban social movements

Introduction

> The possession of wealth is shown by the wasting of time, effort and goods. In order to be conspicuous it must be wasteful . . . what happens in the neo-liberal phase of capitalism is the transformation of whole cities', regions' or islands' economies/societies into centres of 'wasteful' production and consumption (Urry 2010: 206).

Urry's words are clearly designed to emphasize how central he considers the concept of waste to be in late capitalism, and he is by no means alone in this judgement. Gidwani and Reddy (2011: 1625), for example, have characterized waste as 'the political other of capitalist "value" . . . the things, places and lives that are cast outside the pale of "value" at particular moments as superfluity, remnant, excess, or detritus'. Needless to add, there are many, especially in the so-called 'developing' world, who see considerable value in 'detritus'. One

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estimate suggests that around 1 per cent of urban dwellers (or 15 million people) in 'developing' countries survive by scavenging (Medina, 2007). However – especially since the 2008 global financial crisis – the practice is by no means confined to less affluent societies.

Parallel to a broader focus on overconsumption and materialism in the West[1] (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005; Humphery, 2010), recent years in Australia have witnessed growing academic and policy interest in the issues of food, food waste and alternative food networks (AFNs) (Farmar-Bowers *et al.*, 2013). In numerous innovative ways, individuals and groups outside the 'mainstream' have sought to provide their own solutions to 'extra-market' food provision. In Australia, responses range from domestic and community garden production, to food exchange and sharing, to 'direct action' in the form of 'guerrilla' gardening and dumpster diving/skip dipping (also referred to as bin diving) to retrieve edible food discarded by supermarkets, shops and restaurants (Edwards, 2011).

This paper contributes to this debate both by building on recent literature (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013; Wilson, 2012) and focusing attention on the ethical stance and activities of the contemporary freegan subculture in urban Australia. As suggested by the conjunction of the words 'free' and 'vegan', 'freegan' food choices are ethical ones that centre on the issue of waste. According to the freegan.info website:[2]

> Freegans are people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources. . . . they embrace community, generosity, social concern, freedom, cooperation and sharing in opposition to a society based on materialism, moral apathy, competition, conformity and greed.

As a political statement against overconsumption, waste and corporate greed, the origins of freeganism have been traced back to the 'food-gifting' activities of the San Francisco-based Diggers' street theatre collective in the 1960s. However, elements of a much longer historical heritage are also apparent. For hundreds of years, many, so-called 'peasant' societies have actively embraced an ethic of cooperation, conservation and sharing.[3] Similarly, all the world's major religions promote values of charity towards the less fortunate, including food donation. Freeganism also accords with many of the central values of the contemporary 'Occupy Wall Street' movement, along with other 'money-less' movements such as squatting (Cattaneo, 2011) and the myriad of subversive urban social formations analysed by Daskalaki and Mould (2013).

This paper reports on ethnographic research conducted in Australian cities into what many may regard as socially marginal – even abhorrent – practice (Black, 2007). The freegans in this research adopt two forms of practice: 'dumpster-diving' ('dumpster divers' or DD) or participating in the activist soup kitchen called 'Food Not Bombs' (FNB). These forms differ from each other in their sourcing and distribution of food from waste. DD either go out alone or as part of a small team to rummage through supermarket dumpster bins and other commercial food waste outlets for their produce, while FNB members collect

food *before* it hits the bins, often from fresh produce markets, to redistribute to those in need. Such radical, informal freegan activities complement formal, organized, institutional responses to waste, while also drawing attention to often overlooked commercial waste sources (Australian Government, 2010; Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition, 2012).

This study sits firmly within the now rapidly growing agri-food research field focusing on 'consumers as active participants in food provisioning' (Holloway *et al*., 2007a: 2; Wilson, 2012). Through the lens of 'alternative food network' theory (or AFN) it highlights alternatives to the standardization, globalization, and typically unethical nature of the global industrial food system (Dixon, 2011). Freeganism represents an anti- or non- capitalist AFN, linking into a wider research agenda in Australia and elsewhere on food justice (Levkoe, 2006), urban social movements (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013), diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Pusey, 2010), and autonomy (Chatterton, 2005; Leyshon *et al*., 2003; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Wilson, 2012). The emergence of freeganism not only introduces food waste into AFN literature but also refocuses attention on the commercial retail sector's crucial role in producing the waste in the first place – an oversight that often puts excessive blame on the consumer (Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition, 2012; Evans, 2011, 2012; Princen *et al*., 2002).

Waste and food waste in Australia

Food waste is a growing area of concern yet to be adequately addressed in Australia. The National Food Plan (Ludwig, 2010) a document currently in draft stage, aims 'to foster a sustainable, globally competitive, resilient food supply that supports access to nutritious and affordable food'.[4] As part of this process, a lengthy 'Green Paper' was published in July 2012 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012) as a preliminary to the final 'White Paper'. Notably, only 5 of the Green Paper's 274 pages were devoted (cursorily) to food waste. We regard this as a serious omission due to the corresponding – and highly pertinent – issues such as food insecurity where people do not have regular access to safe, nutritionally adequate, affordable and culturally acceptable food, as well as environmental concerns and shrinking domestic agricultural production in Australia (Farmar-Bowers *et al*., 2013).

These issues require expanding in a little more detail. First, in what is ostensibly one of the world's most affluent nations, there is mounting evidence of the widespread incidence of 'food deserts' (ie households living more than 500 metres from a fresh fruit and vegetable retail outlet)[5] in Australia (Rosier, 2011). In a country where three major corporations alone have an unprecedented 90 per cent share of the food retail market that some consider a stranglehold (Ferguson, 2012),[6] grocery prices have risen by 40 per cent in the ten years to 2010, higher than in any other developed nation – in some cases, double the average. Given that people living on low incomes, such as pensions and student

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allowances, often spend as much as 20–30 per cent of their household income on food purchases (in comparison with the national average of 8 per cent), such inflation clearly generates significant hardship (ABC Radio National, 2011). A survey of 81 food relief agencies in Victoria and Tasmania, following the global financial crisis, found a marked increase in demand for their services. Over 21 per cent of the agencies, for example, reported not only a rise of at least 75 per cent in the previous 12 months, but also a significant shift in the demographic profile towards more younger and elderly people and families (SecondBite, 2010). In addition, an earlier study found that, nationally, 11 per cent of the population suffered from food insecurity (NSW Centre for Public Health Nutrition, 2003), while a more recent Victorian investigation confirmed similar proportions for certain local government areas in that State (Department of Health, 2008). These data roughly approximate to estimates of the percentage of the Australian population living in poverty (totalling around 2.2 million people).[7] Needless to add, research by Foodbank[8] found that 77 per cent of the population are either unaware of the issue or refuse to believe that a hunger 'problem' exists in Australia.[9]

Second, the collection and disposal of domestic and municipal waste in landfill sites – around 50 per cent of which consists of organic material – is becoming an increasingly expensive exercise (Australian Government, 2010; Baker *et al*., 2009). Potential new landfill sites close to major urban centres are rare, with transportation distances consequently increasing. As it degrades, that domestic waste which is collected and transported to landfill becomes a major source of methane gas emissions. Methane – a far more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide – currently accounts for some 4 per cent of Australia's total emissions, with food waste as the second largest contributor to this.[10] Perhaps unsurprisingly, Australia has the highest per capita level of greenhouse gas emissions in the developed world. The introduction of carbon taxes in July 2012 increases economic concern on the part of local municipalities and landfill site operators. Waste disposal charges currently average around AU$75 per tonne and it is anticipated that the carbon tax will add $25 to this. One possible solution for food waste management is a renewed emphasis on aerobic home composting (see Lundie and Peters, 2005).

Finally, although Australia is a very large country, the proportion that has fertile soils and sufficient rainfall for productive agriculture is not only severely limited but is also rapidly decreasing due to urban expansion and foreign takeovers (6 per cent of farmland is now majority-owned by overseas interests). The country is now, for example, a net importer of vegetables and fruit. This means that efficiency concerns around agricultural production and consumption are of growing significance. Wasted food, clearly, does not just involve lost nutritional value, but also the water, energy and other resources that go into its production.[11]

With per capita waste generation rates in excess of 2 tonnes per day, low recycling rates and the aforementioned high levels of greenhouse gas emissions, means that by any measure, Australia is a 'wasteful' society. Moreover, as

concluded in a recent Senate Standing Committee inquiry, there is a glaring lack of political will to tackle the problem (Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, 2008). Prior to the introduction of a weak *National Waste Policy* in 2009,[12] the period 2002–2007 had witnessed a 31 per cent increase in waste generation – now 43.8 million tonnes was going to landfill.[13] Approximately a third of this total waste stream was either domestic or municipal waste. Again unsurprisingly, a recent solid waste management audit by Victoria's Auditor-General was highly critical of the lack of progress towards reducing the amount of waste going to landfill in that State (Victorian Auditor-General, 2011).

Since 2004 researchers at the Australia Institute have been monitoring 'wasteful consumption', defined as 'spending on goods and services that are not subsequently consumed' (Hamilton *et al*., 2005: vii). Their 2004 survey of the spending habits of 1,644 respondents found that the average household wasted AU$1226 per year on products that they did not use. This amounted to AU$10.5 million nationally, with food being by far the most commonly wasted item:

> Overall Australians threw away $2.9 billion of fresh food, $630 million of uneaten take-away food, $876 million of leftovers, $596 million of unfinished drinks and $241 million of frozen food, a total of $5.3 billion on all forms of food in 2004 (Hamilton *et al*., 2005: vii–viii).

In 2009, the Institute followed up this project with a more focused study on the purchase, consumption and 'waste' of food by a similar-sized, nationwide sample (Baker *et al*., 2009). The authors concluded that, valued at an estimated AU$5 billion per year, food discarded by households – especially more affluent and single-person households – continued to be a major problem. It is estimated that households discard some 4.45 million tonnes of food each year, alongside the 3 million tonnes discarded by commercial enterprises. 'Food retailers', they argue, 'represent a major barrier to implementing effective waste policies, since their profits are contingent on the amount of food sold rather than the amount of food consumed' (Baker *et al*., 2009: 1).

Following Evans (2011), we should emphasize at this point that we have no intention of pointing the finger of blame wholly at individual consumers for excessive household food waste. As we suggest above, much of the problem has its root cause in the underlying structures of contemporary food production, retailing and consumption in Western societies. Stuart (2009), for example, is unrelenting in his attack on British supermarkets for their excessive production of food waste and their lack of transparency on this issue.[14] His arguments apply with equal force in Australia. However, as Black (2007) further reminds us, in most affluent countries waste on this scale is a relatively recent phenomenon. Following the two World Wars, entire generations grew up espousing the core values of frugality and efficiency in food preparation, while the 1930s Depression in Australia out of necessity fuelled many innovative strategies for sourcing and sharing food. These ranged from widespread foraging in urban and rural environments to reducing waste and the expansion of charitable donation.

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Institutional responses

Historically in Australia, church and other charity organizations have been the main suppliers of emergency food aid to families and individuals in need. More recently, governments at all levels, as well as the three major supermarket chains, have come under mounting pressure from the community to reduce waste, to become more 'sustainable' in their practices, and to take a more active role in providing relief for the growing population of the 'food insecure'. However, in neoliberal Australia, where *private governance* of the food chain is now firmly entrenched, the state, retail chains and peak interest group agencies such as the Australian Food and Grocery Council have all consistently shown a marked reluctance to become involved in hunger relief other than at the most marginal of scales[15] (Busch, 2011). The widening emergency gap has been filled by food rescue charities and not-for-profit organizations such as OzHarvest and Foodbank nation-wide, and FareShare and SecondBite in Victoria (Farmar-Bowers *et al.*, 2013). Over the last decade – and following years of active lobbying by the not-for-profit sector – the work of such agencies has been increasingly facilitated by the passage of so-called 'Good Samaritan' legislation in most States. Starting with Victoria in 2002,[16] this legislation allows not-for-profit organizations to distribute donated food without the fear of being prosecuted by consumers who may subsequently fall ill.

Freeganism – a counter-institutional response

Freegans complement institutional responses to food waste and hunger by targeting discarded food to feed themselves and others in need. Over the last decade, there has been a rise in freegan consciousness – and hence food-waste awareness – with many news articles, books, web, blog sites and wikis[17] widely publicizing what was once a little-known underground subculture. This is illustrated in US-based ethnographies, including, for example, Ferrell (2006), Gross (2009), Barnard (2011) and More (2011). Australian contributions include Rush (2006), Singer and Mason (2006), Edwards (2005) and Edwards and Mercer (2007). This emerging coverage reveals a variety of 'freegans', or people who rescue – and, in the process, revalue – food from waste for human consumption.

Freegans across the world

Over recent years, the practice of 'freeganism' has extended to include broader food sources, social groups, locations and activities. Freegans may choose to eat food sourced from supermarket and other retail outlets' dumpster bins (as already noted, commonly referred to as 'dumpster divers' or 'skip dippers'), to

collect, or receive, donated food before it hits the bins from open fresh food markets (such as members of 'Food Not Bombs'). Alternatively, they may choose to forage wild foods from their surrounding locales. As such, the sources of waste determine their diet, with vegans, or vegetarian freegans, eating meat if found in supermarket bins, while other diets include what have become known as 'dumpsterian', 'frego', 'raw foodism' and 'veganic' diets.

The most commonly researched freegans are university students who are drawn to the practice not least for the free food, fun and excitement but who often also endorse environmental and social justice ethics. Other accounts range from activists involved in 'new cooperativism' in the UK and Europe (Pusey, 2010; Cattaneo, 2011), to the practice of 'DIY-punk' (Edwards, 2005), to Barnard's (2011) New Yorker freegans who participate in dumpstering and other activities organized by the group, freegan.info, with the explicit purpose of educating the public about issues of food waste. This range of participants also extends across gender, from males who enjoy 'playing' in the bins, to More's (2011) female freegans who are often well-educated graduates or university students.

Regardless of the diversity of approaches, these participants share an ethical and political commitment to reduce the amount of food waste produced by the industrial, capitalist food system. In other words, food has become the means by which to enact this political and ethical belief. Additional motivations include not contributing to the demand for ethically unacceptable products of industrial agriculture, including pesticides, excessive packaging, labour exploitation and animal cruelty.

Freegans in Australia

As noted, this paper is based upon ethnographic research. It was conducted in 2005 in two Australian cities in which 30 freegans were interviewed and their activities and events observed. The participants were a far cry from the (often elderly) 'food insecure', urban poor identified above. Rather, they were often well-educated males in their mid-20s from middle-class backgrounds practising two, often interrelated, activities: dumpster-diving on the one hand and involvement in FNB on the other.

DD is the most widely-publicized form of freeganism. DD food is for individual or small-group consumption, with DD households enjoying what Hoffman (1993: 8) calls a 'maximum diving lifestyle', which does not mean all income and possessions are obtained from dumpsters, but rather that participants are able to enjoy the greatest benefits possible.

FNB's history, that basically represents an anarchist, autonomous soup kitchen, began in the United States in 1980, when a group of friends were protesting against the Seabrook nuclear power project in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The movement originally coalesced around issues of nuclear power, militarism and food, but has since expanded throughout the world to

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redistribute food that otherwise would go to waste in areas where it is most needed (Butler and McHenry, 2000). Today, volunteers who share similar political beliefs gather to cook vegan meals to distribute to the poor on the streets of Melbourne. This city has one of the most regular, ongoing FNB chapters in Australia, one that has maintained a regular presence since its inception in the Easter of 1996. The organization regularly operates three soup kitchens, distributes fruit and vegetables to charities, and occasionally supports benefits for causes such as indigenous issues, veganism and anarchism.

In Australia, people who participate in either of these two above activities can be broadly categorized into one of four activist subcultures delineated as (i) *purist university food co-op hippies* ('They'll be more into organic food and being healthy and good to your body, but there's edges of that community that will also be into squatting and DD'[18]); (ii) *anarcho-punk or pc-punks* ('Different from the crusty punks, as they are generally more politically aware and intellectual, but there's often a lot of overlap between the two groups'); (iii) the *autonomistas* ('They're all into being really intellectual about their politics and they're autonomist socialists and all . . . and are often involved in independent media projects'); and (iv) the *forest ferals* (often sporting 'a shaved head with crusty hair out the back, kinda anti-intellectual').

Since this original Australian research (Edwards, 2005), recent media and literature suggests that while these activist subcultures have persisted, some also have merged and evolved into new affiliations in line with Daskalaki and Mould's (2013) conceptualization of 'rhizomatic' social formations. As such, 'freeganism' has grown to encompass both genders, a range of subcultures, and a wider range of practices. Freegans therefore occupy one segment in a broad spectrum of AFNs, providing accessible food to those in need, fulfilling a sense of freedom, fun (Mair and Sumner, 2008) and self-empowerment to those who desire it, while simultaneously contesting the justice, efficiency and values embedded within the industrial food system. They join a wider net of others who participate in alternative food economies, often in cities, where people grow, glean and exchange their food outside of capitalist relations. 'Freegans' are thus more than simply radical, punk and/or male university students, but also include ethical, anti-consumer citizens of all ages, backgrounds and a variety of locations – effectively adding a modern layer to the biblical 'gleaners' of earlier eras.

Freegan food

So what do freegans actually eat? Those who DD often eat food that has been discarded due to 'best-before' or 'use-by' dates, that are either tarnished or that have broken packaging, from restaurants, bakeries, supermarkets and markets at the end of the day's trading. Supermarkets are particularly good sources as a consequence of their deliberate overstocking to give an illusion of 'cornucopian choice' (Stuart, 2009: 27). Godinho (2009) calculated that, at any given time, there are around 25 tonnes of food on the shelves of the average Australian

supermarket. He has also estimated that in Victoria, alone, each year sees food dumped in landfills to fully stock 30,000 supermarkets. Food that is dumpster-dived from supermarkets then, consists of a wide choice, as explained by one diver:

> Basically, when it comes to food, anything you can think of that the supermarket stocks, you can get it in the bin from organic macadamia nuts to apples to laundry detergent to fertiliser to jars of olives to feta cheese . . .

General foods collected (in declining order of popularity) include vegetables and fruit, damaged packaged goods (including rice and canned food), bread, eggs and cheese. Although the bins contain a disproportionate amount of 'junk' food – such as packets of potato chips and sugary sweets – many DD opt for more healthy items, such as fresh fruit and vegetables. A key level of enjoyment for DD activists is the element of surprise, with the experience akin to a treasure hunt. Best 'scores' found by participants include shopping trolleys full of pasta, several large jars of vegemite, boxes of coco-pops, a bottle of Absolut vodka, 12 bottles of Chivas Regal scotch whisky, 23 slabs of beer, 12 packs of Guinness stout, and 200 boxes of Ferrero Rocher chocolates (Edwards, 2005).

Contrary to what would be expected, few people fall sick from DD food. This is because of the wide selection of produce available, the common adherence to a vegan or vegetarian diet, careful food preparation knowledge, and the sensible application of the senses of touch, taste and smell in product selection and preparation. The wide choice and knowledge of the best times for collection (for example, when ice-cream is still solid), allow foragers to pick and choose the best produce on offer. As one diver explains:

> When you do dumpster a lot, you end up eating mainly supermarket food which is not food that you would choose to eat if you had to pay for it. So you do get quite fussy . . . If you are fussy, you have the time to search for what you want. . . . Like we won't take [anything that's] fully opened and exposed . . . You don't have to take the zucchini with a bit of mould on it because there's a perfectly good one there . . . Just because you got it from the dumpster, doesn't mean that people are going to want to eat it.

The vegan or vegetarian diet preference helps prevent food poisoning as more risky, perishable products are not sourced. This dietary selection is especially important in warmer climates where decomposition occurs at a faster rate. Furthermore, many DD have moderate to high levels of food preparation knowledge and skills, as many, often being students or youth starting out in life, work in commercial kitchens, cafes or food-related industries.[19] By personally selecting produce using the senses of touch, taste and smell, dumpster divers no longer rely on supermarket labels to gauge food safety. This marks a conscious shift away from corporate control, enabling divers to reclaim a connection to their senses.

In terms of FNB, food comes directly from the leftovers at organic fresh food markets, consisting of fruit and vegetables that would normally be highly priced. The state of such food is explained by a FNB participant:

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> There's no high risk food [because there is no meat or dairy] and the food's at its point where it's at its height in ripeness and it's the most nutritionally good when the shops would throw it away. . . . It's because of its shelf life – you can't have something there that would be rotten by the end of the next day . . .

The FNB soup kitchen menu considers the nutritional content of the food, the physical state of its clients (nothing too spicy and providing a variety of dishes to cater for those with allergies), and the clientele's established food tastes (for example, baked potatoes are offered as a healthy alternative to hot chips).

Such alternative consumption practices by both DD and FNB questions conventional food safety boundaries. So, while Morgan (2009: 15) argues that we need to recognize a tripartite definition of *avoidable* food losses (ie truly edible foods); *possibly avoidable* (discarded but potentially edible food); and *unavoidable* losses, the freegans' diet demonstrates that such categories are highly subjective. By reaching beyond 'acceptable' food choices in the consumption of wasted food – and creating a space where no rules or regulations except the human senses of touch, taste, sight and smell apply – freegans access a layer of food waste that remains qualitatively out of bounds for institutionalized food rescue organizations.

Dumpster etiquette

Freegan ethics are also practised in the collection of food. Freegans make their own rules and these rules reflect an ethics of care for other freegans, for others in need, and for the environment. These ethics occur at many levels. 'Dumpster etiquette' expresses the three most common rules of dumpster diving as revealed from ethnographic accounts:

1. To come and go quietly and not leave a mess. Bins should be left as if they were never touched (some people even go to the extent of carrying a small broom and dustpan to sweep the area upon departure). This rule aims to prevent attracting negative attention to the activity, which includes raising issues of public liability that may result in security lockdowns.
2. First come, first served – if someone is in the dumpster upon arrival, their space and right to food must be respected. Patience and sharing are core values.
3. To remember that, although there is not much competition, some people rely upon this alternative food source. As such, it is important to not trash foods: this includes not ripping bags unnecessarily and re-tying bags after initial investigation, and only taking what is needed so as to leave a good quality and range of food for DD or the homeless who may arrive later.

Eating on the edge

The location of freegan practices also serves an important role in revealing both an ethics and politics behind wasteful consumption. Australian DD are

generally secretive about their 'premium' DD spots, often due to concern about possible actions by authorities that may damage or lessen their supplies. The selection of favoured locations for Australian DD takes into consideration the quality and quantity of food, as well as proximity to, and ease of food collection. Ethical factors also impinge upon source selection, such as company histories, labour conditions, the environmental and social background of the products they sell, and the sheer volume of waste generated. Large supermarket chains are generally favoured over smaller independent stores because of their support for large-scale industrial farming. Their practice of importing foodstuffs from poorer, overseas countries to the detriment of local farmers is also a concern.[20] Multinational chains are similarly targeted due to their impersonal nature and their use of in-store, micro-management techniques to encourage citizens to consume beyond need. By targeting large multinational corporations, dumpster divers act as modern-day 'Robin Hoods', redistributing wealth:

> When we found thirty frypans in the dumpster . . . [we thought] that the public should have those frypans . . . we put them all in a trolley and took them all down to the Brotherhood[21] . . .

People also DD from smaller retail outlets, but for different reasons. These stores often discard gourmet- or health-related produce, highly valued by those who 'dive'. Given the shops' smaller size, they are often more resourceful with their stock than larger stores, producing less waste overall and investing more time in shop details. As one participant explains:

> The bigger the stores, the less likely they are to have these policies – like smaller organic bakeries will give food . . . Whereas bigger ones will say it's too much of an effort and chuck it out.

This secrecy of DD location in Australia contrasts to Barnard's (2011) study in New York City, where an organized group of freegans choose to draw public attention to their activities by participating in 'public trash tours' in which they inspect local dumpsters and place their produce on footpaths accompanied by open lectures to highlight issues of capitalist overconsumption and waste.

FNB serving sites in many ways parallel this placement for public protest, as food servings occur in politically specific places – that is, not simply where they are most needed, but also where they are likely to be seen. Two of the Australian sites, for example, are located beside high-rise, low-income housing complexes, while the third is located in a low-income suburb. The first two sites represent the permaculture concept of the 'edge' (Crabtree, 1999), or the fertile interface or overlap between two ecosystems, as they are situated between 'up-market' shopping districts in full view of trams that run along both these streets into the central city, effectively conveying the activists' identity and message to a diversity of citizens within this communicative zone. This 'audience' ranges from business commuters, to people going out to dinner or art

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exhibitions, to university students and travellers. FNB participants thus occupy 'fringe' territories on street corners between poor and affluent communities, feeding themselves and their friends – a blend of anarcho- and crusty punks and 'ferals' – alongside the homeless and hungry.

Hetherington (2004: 159) recognizes this spatial (and temporal) aspect of 'waste' by talking of 'disposal', where disposal, in a fluid and never quite final state, is defined as the 'continual practice of engaging with making and holding things in a state of absence'. Hence, objects do not follow a neat, linear path travelling from production to consumption but instead can loop back through space and time to acquire new value (see also Evans, 2012). Drawing on the work of Douglas (1984) among others, Hetherington argues that this placement of absence has consequences both for social relations and for creating modes of representational order. The public display of eating food that would have been wasted while people go hungry is akin to 'unfinished disposal', where 'first burial', such as disposal of food at the end of the market day, has either 'failed, been hurried, or has not been carried out to its full effect' (Hetherington, 2004: 170). Freegans effectively introduce an extra step before the final stage of 'waste', forming a space where new values, identities and social categorizations are drawn.

For DD, this transition occurs during the process of collecting, cleaning and cooking dumpstered cuisine. This reassignment of value is similar to that of 'punk cuisine', in which punk subculture defines industrially processed (or 'cooked') food as corporate-capitalist 'junk food', supporting cash-cropping, causing cancer and leading to the commodification of nature. As researched by Clark (2004), 'punks' – people who critique privilege and challenge social hierarchies as encountered in their participation in the Black Cat cafe in Seattle – choose to eat either 'raw' (unprocessed) or 'rotten' foods (such as stolen natural foods from health shops or dumpstered food) rather than 'civilized' (cooked) foods. By appropriating provisions outside of the marketplace, these punks – like freegans – symbolically returned blemished 'cooked' food to a 'raw' status, rendering it acceptable for politicized consumption.

Similarly, by halting 'final burial', participants in FNB direct attention to the two interlinked issues of food waste and hunger. At this juncture, freegans extend the life of the product, they value 'use' over 'exchange' value, and they re-embed 'waste' as a nutritional substance that is socially exchanged. Through their practices, freegans draw new boundaries of what is acceptable, adding dimensions of social and environmental justice to material value to challenge both the ethics of the industrial food system and Western society's definition of 'waste'. The reappropriation and redistribution of food by FNB in the public sphere acknowledges 'unfinished, unmanaged disposal', expressed by Hetherington as 'haunting' (also see Gordon, 1997). By exposing, and even performing, what would have been 'waste', freegans convey a message of capitalist impotence, pointing out the government's mismanagement of resources and their inability to protect their citizens from hunger.

More than a free meal

Returning to Urry (2010), quoted in our introduction, we suggest that freegans go beyond rescuing food to also revalue and reuse other aspects of transport, work, leisure and housing, via their lifestyle choices. Preferred transport, for instance, includes cycling, public transport and the use of alternative fuels such as biodiesel. In accordance with their 'anti-consumerist' beliefs, rather than choosing more mainstream, 'green' or 'ethical' commercial options, many freegans choose to reduce their dependence on paid work in order to lessen their participation in the capitalist system. Unable to live completely without money, many freegans work part-time in food cooperatives or organic foodstores or choose to pursue more ethical careers, such as social support in housing or community development. Recreational activities often equate to activist activities, with freegans participating in events such as *Critical Mass*, a communal bicycle ride that reclaims the streets from cars, and *Reclaim the Streets*, a political street party.

The Australian research also revealed that many freegans also shared a 'DIY-punk' ('do-it-yourself'-punk) ethos, namely, to reject the values inherent in capitalism by living outside the capitalist system as much as possible by not making or spending money. This lifestyle choice neither supports nor contributes to environmental exploitation or social injustices deemed embedded within capitalist power structures. Freegans often take part in such DIY-punk activities including squatting, scavenging, using community warehouses, cycling, second-hand clothes' shopping, fare evasion, 'zine' (magazine) production and making clothes or music (Edwards, 2005; Edwards and Mercer, 2007). One FNB participant explains the rationale behind DIY-punk and how it relates to time, work and DD:

> DIY is taking something into your own hands and out of other peoples' hands. In the case of shoplifting, the corporations will try to charge as much as they can . . . So when you shoplift, you're taking that back and the reason why that's so important is because if you don't work, you don't get money and that means . . . you could starve to death. Another way of breaking that down is every hour you spend working, you're basically paid with an hour of your life so you can survive. So I work 10 hours a day, someone decides that my time is worth $8.50 an hour – they're buying bits of my life for $8.50. . . . With dumpster-diving you're taking that back in your own hands, your own life back in your own hands. That's your DIY – if I do it myself and spend less, essentially the more of my life I'm able to spend doing what I'd love to do . . . Stuff that's beneficial to myself and to the community . . . It could be about putting out a record that's not a label . . . I would really like to try and get my own sustainable vegie garden. I make my own clothes, I listen to mainly DIY music.

Aside from DD, squatting – the occupation of privately owned buildings that are not being used – is another key example of an Australian DIY-punk activity. One dumpster diver comments:

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> Yep, [there's] definitely a correlation between dumpster diving and squatting – they've basically let the house become a bin . . . Thrown it away . . . You make use of all the shit you find . . . We used to have a joke that the house was just a big dumpster . . . We had all these appliances we DD as well, like sandwich grills, grinders, juicers and stuff. We used to joke that we'd get this garbage and spread it with this garbage, put some garbage in it, stick in the hot garbage . . . All the ingredients in the toasted sandwich were dumpstered, including the appliance.

These activities; freeganism, DD, FNB and DIY-punk, all fit concepts of 'autonomy' such as autonomous economic spaces (Leyshon *et al.*, 2003) autonomous geographies (Chatterton, 2005; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006) and autonomous food spaces (Wilson, 2012). Pickerill and Chatterton's definition of autonomous geographies – places in which people seek to constitute 'non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation' (2006: 730) fits well with the freegan ethic.

Conclusion: freegans and food waste

This study of freegans contributes to the literature on food waste, AFNs, diverse economies and autonomy in several ways. Both freegans and formal food-rescue organizations, through their processes of respatialization and revaluing, redefine what society considers as 'waste'. Freegans add an extra dimension by accessing a controversial food source to redistribute free food (or what may be seen as 'waste') both to people who follow their political beliefs, to the general community, and to people in need. Their actions, couched in overt political and ethical discourse, are demonstrated or performed in 'edge' locations, further visualizing issues of retail food waste and hunger. Once an underground – and, some would consider, legally marginal activity – the media have increasingly drawn attention to the act of reappropriating food still fit for human consumption that would otherwise have been discarded. This has certainly struck a moral chord with the public, and, if not perceiving freegans as the 'Robin Hoods' they would like to be seen as, many endorse their right to 'glean' food if they so choose. Although not everyone relates positively to such a diet, and while freegans may not resolve issues as they consume rather than produce their own food outside of neoliberalism, freegan ethics and actions nevertheless reveal capitalism's contradictions and serve to reconnect people, place and produce in new ways.

Freeganism, lying as it does at the radical end of AFN examples, fits within a network of activities that foster innovative processes endorsing characteristics of the local, of quality and of ethics, while simultaneously establishing new relationships between producers and consumers. By introducing new sources and processes, those who participate in this movement serve to embed meanings and trust through proximate place-based relations (Feagan, 2007; Renting *et al.*, 2003). As Goodman (2009) explains, the moral economy of AFNs represents a double movement that disconnects one from the current system in

order to critically reflect on established truths and to form new moral understandings for (re)connection. The recent emergence of freeganism contributes to non-capitalist AFN literature, a discourse which has grown in definition, range and practice over recent years to include, amongst others, activists in New York and food foragers who re-read city spaces to consume kerbside weeds and the produce of wild fruit and nut trees (Kramer, 2011). Perhaps, as Urry claims, our cities have been 'wasted'. Within them, however, there are many who are redefining and revaluing the world around us – and eating it for dinner!

Notes

1 By contrast, for a recent, controversial view challenging the 'overconsumption' rhetoric and arguing that the world is now undergoing a substantial consumption 'paradigm shift', see Pearce (2012).
2 http://www.freegan.info (accessed 3 August 2012). See also Kurutz (2007).
3 One example is the 'gold coat' ceremony in Nagaland, India. A person hosts a village feast that may last for days until they have divested themselves of all their assets. They are then awarded the gold coat in recognition of the 'feast of merit'.
4 http://www.daff.gov.au/nationalfoodplan/national-food-plan (accessed 20 August 2012).
5 See www.fooddeserts.org.
6 As in the UK, Australia does not have an independent watchdog overseeing the activities of supermarket chains. (Editors' note: A supermarket ombudsman was appointed by the UK government on 22 January 2013; see http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-21141841, accessed 23 January 2013.)
7 However, findings inevitably are coloured by the statistical techniques used to measure 'insecurity'. Another recent study, utilizing a more robust and sophisticated US measuring tool, uncovered much higher rates of food insecurity in three disadvantaged Sydney suburbs (Nolan *et al*., 2006).
8 www.foodbank.com.au. In an attempt to raise the level of awareness, Foodbank constructed a giant, replica sculpture of the Sydney Harbour Bridge made out of donated food alongside that structure on World Food Day, 16 October 2011.
9 In common with 'waste', there are serious measurement problems as many definitions conflate 'severe' and 'moderate' forms of food insecurity (Temple, 2008).
10 Some researchers differentiate between 'food waste' and 'food loss' (eg fruit and vegetable skins or food scraps). Food wastage has been found to be the largest source of organic matter in landfill sites (see Rathje, 1986; Schapper and Chan, 2010).
11 For example, over 3 million tonnes of food are dumped in Australian landfill sites each year. The embedded water is enough to supply Melbourne and Sydney for a year. Similarly, dumping a kilogram of beef equates to the 50,000 litres of water involved in production (www.secondbite.org). A detailed assessment of the environmental performance of one food rescue organization (FareShare) found that for every kilogram of food recovered there were savings of 56 litres of water and 1.5 kg of greenhouse gases (Hyder Consulting, 2008; see also Ridoutt *et al*., 2010).
12 An earlier national waste policy had been launched in 1992 but it was largely symbolic.
13 www.environment.gov.au/wastepolicy/about (accessed 21 September 2011).
14 The author of this hard-hitting book lived for a year solely on food products gleaned from supermarket bins.
15 Note, for example, that the 13-person, Working Group established to formulate a National Food Plan (NFP) has strong representation from the food and grocery and agriculture industries, but little or no representation from environmental, health, or community groups and the welfare sector.

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16 *Wrongs and Other Acts (Public Liability Insurance Reform) 2002 ('Good Samaritan Law) (Vic)*. New South Wales enacted similar legislation in 2005, the Australian Capital Territory in 2008 and South Australia and Queensland in 2009.
17 For example, http://trashwiki.org/en/Main_Page
18 Quotations are from Edwards (2005) and Edwards and Mercer (2007).
19 One respondent is a trained chef, two others work in hospitality, four work in food cooperatives, and nearly all participants commented that they enjoy cooking.
20 One DD participant noted this discrepancy of wealth and its consequences for the developing world when she established a FNB site at Cancun, Mexico, in defiance against the World Trade Organization conference. See also, the chronicle of the Brazilian artist, Vik Muniz's work in the Oscar-nominated film, *Waste Land* (www.vikmuniz.net).
21 The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a large welfare charity organization in Australia.

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