

Digest

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Review of:

Freegans: Diving into the Wealth of Food Waste in America.

Alex V. Barnard. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. Pp. 294, index.

By: Kylie Schroeder

Amid the rising interest in where and how food is produced—and the correlating increased availability of organic, local, and ethical goods—Alex V. Barnard’s ethnography about “freegans,” a faction of anti-capitalist counter culture concerned with the excessive surfeit of ex-commodities found primarily in the form of food, is both timely and thought-provoking. Based on personal involvement in the freegan movement and ethnographic research from 2007 to 2012, *Freegans: Diving into the Wealth of Food Waste in America* provides a compelling and coherent dialogue between participants in the freegan.info community and “scientific theories about capitalism, waste, and social movements” (xiii). Barnard supplies examples of diverse motivations held by those who self-identify as “freegans” and the actions they take in the name of activism.

Barnard identifies freegans loosely as individuals who reject capitalism and strive for alternative strategies of existence, in a system where the best options of ethical consumption are considered not good enough. While one frequently identified activity associated with freeganism is “collective waste reclamation” (dumpster diving) for food (86), *Freegans* examines a number of other ways in which these activists voluntarily limit their participation in capitalist society, such as alternative forms of transportation, community building, housing, and the procurement and maintenance of goods that would have otherwise been wasted as ex-commodities—oftentimes indistinguishable from the wares presented for consumer purchase.

Barnard’s work focuses on participants from the freegan.info community based



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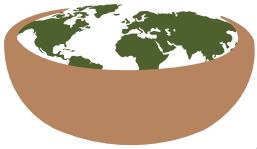
largely in New York, though he offers regional and global examples by comparison. While the author readily admits that the book does not attempt to represent all freegans, he found the freegan.info group the most visible and organized assemblage at the time of his research; the group thus provides an opportunity to examine the efforts of individuals who are trying to make what can be viewed as a failed system more ethical, while attempting to minimize participation in the system.

While he notes that freegans have received a fair amount of media attention, Barnard focuses on the fetish of waste and ex-commodities to show how freegans reject ethical consumption. Barnard states that his intention was an attempt to create “a piece of journalistic reporting” that addresses the “underlying processes that make freeganism possible and the issues that drive them to the dumpster” that have been absent thus far from discussion surrounding the group’s activities and motivations (xiii). He points out that while there has been increased general interest in where food comes from, there has been little work focused on where it actually ends up. He notes that an astonishing 40 percent of the food supply in the United States is never consumed (2).

Freegans opens with “A Brief History of a Tomato,” in which a single salvaged item is used to illustrate the shocking statistics of food waste in America, before Barnard discusses freeganism and sociological theory. He uses this narrative to demonstrate that waste extends far beyond a single tomato, and is in fact a reflection of generally unseen “human exploitation and ecological harm” (2).

Barnard introduces his participants by sharing their stories and histories of involvement with different movements and their disenchantment with other forms of activism. The initial chapter, “Capitalism’s Cast-offs,” explores the inception of freeganism and its affiliation with other anarchist groups. The author traces the history of the movement while situating the group’s ideologies within other political mindsets. The history of the group is combined with a history of ex-commodification and the sociological implication that capitalism cannot function without waste.

Barnard then identifies the demographics of the 22 participants (the majority of whom are white, middle to upper middle class, college educated, childless and unmarried) and explores their motivations for involvement in the movement. He provides three major influences: ideologies imparted from older family members, childhood rebellion, and personal practices involving waste that evolved over



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time. Barnard then explores the activities linked to freeganism and freegans' intentions to criticize capitalism while maintaining minimal involvement in the system itself. The book concludes by exploring the diversity of opinions and even some of the contradictions that exist within the movement, before discussing the decline of the group amidst internal and external backlash and conflict.

Two concepts discussed by Barnard were particularly welcome. First was the representation of the most widely-recognized freegan activity, dumpster diving, as a scripted performance with specific intentions for those involved. This analysis combined participant accounts with the author's observations and offered an interesting look behind the scenes of the group's activities and self-representation. The second was the persuasive argument in which Barnard presents freegans' evidence, challenging preconceptions that consumer activism is an efficient way to make a change—especially with mass-marketing of “ethical” products that have as many negative consequences as the products they are trying to replace.

Barnard succeeds in writing clearly for non-sociologists and those without intimate knowledge of economics, so they can easily digest his work. He is not afraid of the contradictions that presented themselves in his research, but rather uses them to explore the diverse ideologies and practices that the freegan group utilized to work within a flawed system.

While *Freegans* is packed full of vivid and engaging discussion, I would like to have seen stronger emphasis on freegan activities outside of the reclamation of edible waste. Perhaps the constant return to dumpster diving and trash tours' emphasis on food intentionally reflects the most widely recognized aspect of the movement and the activity that caught many members' attention. It seemed that there could be enough evidence for greater discussion of the non-edible aspects of the movement such as housing, transportation, and clothing, for example.

I would recommend this book to anyone interested in activism, modern anarchist foodways, and the politics of waste, and even to people who wish to become more aware of the shortcomings of the capitalist consumer system that many take for granted. This book was both enjoyable and eye-opening, and will definitely encourage readers to take a second look at their daily environments with new (and perhaps necessary) perspective.