CONCEPT PICKING AND CAPITALISM ON THE STREET

Alex V. BARNARD, *Freegans. Diving Into the Wealth of Food Waste in America* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016)

This book relies on an ethnography of the freegan.info group—a founding movement for environmental activism in general and the struggle against food waste in particular—to reflect on the central role played by waste in capitalist economies. "Freegan.info" is the name of a website gathering analyses and information about food waste, waste picking and alternatives to consumerism; but it is also part of a larger range of new practices, developed by a New York-based organisation that calls itself the *freegans*, in an effort to escape the market economy by building a lifestyle avoiding money. Based on sharing, recovering and repairing, this lifestyle includes dumpster diving for food—a practice that freegan.info made famous by organizing "trash tours" involving collective and public waste picking in Manhattan's garbage. It thereby made food waste public, teaching skills and delivering messages to participants and passers by.

Having attended freegan.info activities on a regular basis from 2007 to 2009, and having interviewed their principal members in 2009 and 2012, Barnard is able to tell both their individual stories and those of the movement itself. He is also able to document their various activities (dumpster diving, feasts, free markets, bike repairing, skill-share events, organizational meetings, and so on). Paying attention to the debates inside the freegan.info community and to the mediatic rhetoric that their movement gave rise to, he is also able to expose their principles as well as the limits to their action. At the same time, he challenges many of the prejudices and misunderstandings from which this community has suffered, particularly due to its mediatic overexposure. Mixing ethnographical reports, economic analyses and historical reflections, Barnard discusses freegan theories about why useful goods wind up in the trash—theories he heard while spending time with freegans on the street and during events, while collecting garbage, cooking or repairing. Narrative, conceptual and reflexive at the same time, this lively conversation between several interlocutors and times gives way to a nuanced and complex reflection on the political aims of freeganism, on the strategies it offers to challenge

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capitalism, and on the historical forms and present dynamics of capitalism. These different aspects are deeply embedded, and the purpose of the book is to listen, give voice to and discuss "the lessons freeganism teaches about the nature of capitalism and the limits of consumer-oriented reform" [Barnard, 2016: 23].

Barnard succeeds in accounting for this embeddedness first by paying close attention to the biographical trajectories of the individuals involved in freegan.info. It allows him to show that, as former members of various anarchist, animal rights or food justice movements, they are nonetheless all similar in their disavowal of "consumer activism"—this "faith in the capacity of individuals to change the world by buying one product or another" [Barnard, 2016: 6]. After trying various political strategies based on boycott and buycott, freegans discovered, according to Barnard, that "the idea of 'consumer power' rests on believing the rhetoric of capitalism while ignoring how it actually works" [Barnard, 2016: 223]. Having chosen to boycott the entire system by not taking part in its economy, they were required to change their material and technical habits. In describing these new habits, practices or discourses, Barnard is able to expose his own analysis of the "workings" and "rhetorics" of capitalism, articulated around two fundamental concepts: "ex-commodification" and "fetishism of waste."

The term "ex-commodification" was used by Arjun Appadurai in *The social life of things* [1986: 16] to describe items temporarily or permanently withdrawn from the market for various purposes. Barnard, however, is committed to singling out the particular case of discarding in this withdrawal, and to draw a connection between ex-commodifying and the dynamics of capitalism. Using this concept of "ex-commodity" to re-read Marx and Polanyi, he shows that waste is not "an 'externality' or 'failure' of the market but a source of value and a driver of production in the capitalist system" [Barnard, 2016: 15]. In capitalist economies, waste results from a profitable use of excess and surplus, which creates scarcity and exchange value by producing abundance and denying use value to certain goods—"ex-commodifying" them. Following Barnard through the dumpsters and garbage bags of Manhattan, we can observe, as the freegans themselves did down the streets, that not only commodifying and selling, but also ex-commodifying and wasting are part of the global process of marketization. If we find so many products in the supermarkets and bakery dumpsters at the end of the day, it is not because these shops or corporations lack efficiency or planning skills to avoid or reduce waste; it is because offering, for example, a picture of

abundance, hygiene and choice by keeping the shelves always full of different packaged goods is part of their marketing strategy. That is why more marketing studies, and more market in general, is not going to solve the problem—it *is* the problem. A problem that we literally do not see because the process of ex-commodification is made invisible thanks to what Barnard calls the "fetishism of waste."

Barnard asks how it is possible that we accept and contribute to so much wasting, even though no one would be willing to say that this is a good thing. He invites us to think about the different practices of discarding and the concept of "waste" itself as tools that hide or euphemize the capitalist logic of ex-commodification. As Marx's "fetishism of the commodity" expresses how the social processes of production are masked by commodification, the fetishism of waste—as something that we must separate from, ignore and fear—also hides the "social arrangements" that created this waste, and the further problems it will cause. It is easier to separate from things without asking where they will end up when we see them as something that *is* waste, when we suppose that there is a "natural death" of things [Barnard, 2016: 146]. To ex-commodify *and* to call ex-commodities "waste" leads us to ignore or deny their use value: we suppose that waste is precisely something that has neither use value nor exchange value, because it is lying out there for free. To make a fetish of waste hides the fact that these things are ex-commodities; that wasting creates exchange value out of exchange value.

Demystifying this fetish of waste, Barnard adds a more economic and political viewpoint to the study of the "cultural trope that anything labelled 'waste' is intrinsically contaminated" [Barnard, 2016: 194], a fieldwork opened up by Mary Douglas and widely explored in contemporary discard studies. To "imagine waste away" [Barnard, 2016: 212] is an economically-based cultural trope, that we must study and fight as such. Here lies the historical diagnosis of Barnard: following Weber, as well as Boltanski and Chiapello in the conceptualization of the "spirit of capitalism," he maintains that the fetishism of waste, along with discourses on sustainable growth or consumer activism, is a strategy that capitalism effectively deploys to control (and profit from) social struggles about overproduction and environmentalism. If ex-commodification is made possible on such a huge scale, it is not only because of technical progress in production or distribution; it is also because it is made acceptable, as unavoidable and disgusting, through the fetishism of waste. The unveiling,

description and naming of this fetish constitute the major conceptual and political contributions of this book.

Barnard's re-conceptualization of freegans' speeches and practices offers other interesting insights, but also calls for more developments. Barnard provides a critical assessment of many concepts and discourses that freegans have built through writing, talking and chatting. Are monthly free markets a gift economy, or another kind of charitable initiative? Can we live "against" capitalism without living "outside" of it? Is urban foraging for edible trash or plants a way to get back to "nature"? What is nature? Is it a place where no human lives, or is it a way to live? He studies at length the paradox that freegans tend to call waste "unnatural" and yet describe waste picking as a more natural way of life. One may regret that Barnard did not expand this reflexive and critical approach to other commonsense concepts, for instance technology, civilization or need: how is it that so many freegans call for less "technology," while they are basically trying to change our lives by inventing or rediscovering new kinds of techniques? The account given in chapter 4 of the do-it-yourself ethics and the creativity developed to recover and recycle should lead to a more complex reflection on the ambivalence of technology: how is it that we have to free ourselves from technological alienation but that the solution consists in developing new, empowering techniques? Is this simply a difference between high and low tech? Should we not take a look at the social and economic history of modern technology, at the privatized and highly secretive backgrounds of contemporary engineering, designing, research and development? Similarly, why is it that a group of people relying on collective and community-based practices of sharing call for a "pre-civilized way of life"? What concept of "civilization" do they use and oppose to the dominant one, when they talk about "community"? If freegans "struggled to break free from the 'invented desires' and 'fabricated needs' [...] of advanced capitalism" [Barnard, 2016: 181], did they discover something like uninvented desires and unfabricated needs? If yes, what are they? If not, why not? And if they are trying to invent and fabricate other needs, desires and ways of satisfying them, are freegans really "shouting for less" or for something "else"?

Another important question that begs for more conceptual, but also ethnographical work is the relationship between freeganism and the local and informal economic context in which the freegans' activities take place, and which they may have contributed to change. As "freegans do voluntarily what, for many people around the world, is

a necessity for survival" [Barnard, 2016: 10], how do their practices meet, articulate or come into conflict with other urban foragers and waste workers? Freegans, according to Barnard's accounts, are aware of the fact that they come from privileged social backgrounds; they pay great attention to sharing with people they meet during trash tours. But can we not say something deeper about how freegans' activities and their vision of waste as a free resource upon which to build an economy based on avoiding money meets with other older and much more widespread uses of waste: as a valuable commodity (in the case of people re-selling goods on the streets or in flea markets); as an immediate source of few but real dollar coins (in the case of the numerous "canners" that pick cans up on the streets of Manhattan and other boroughs day and night); or as the raw material of a very dynamic and lucrative new sector of activities like recycling and recovering? This reviewer wishes that Barnard had addressed some of these issues, and used his ethnography to write about the interactions between different kinds of waste pickers. During one of freegan.info's trash tours, I once met someone working for a compost enterprise: was he to be given priority in accessing the resources represented by the huge pile of black garbage bags full of lettuce and carrots in front of us? How can we decide collectively about these questions of priority or legitimacy? How do we handle competition if resources are not scarce, but overabundant? How do we organize so that everyone can access and valorize them? How do we get rid of this idea of competition and build "community" out of waste?

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