Recycling of Things Past:

Freegan Use of Primitivist Strategies and Urban Foraging

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Abstract

In this study, I suggest that freegan practices can be studied in relation to primitivism—a cultural strategy that advocates a return to nature, or alternatively, a return to a more ‘wild’ state of being. Individuals known as freegans are primarily young westerners who choose to fulfill their needs—be it sustenance, desire, or other essential services—without participating in the formal economy. To achieve this, they use activities aimed at reducing socio-ecological impact, the most popular being dumpster diving. As I will show, freegans employ these practices in an urban context, and frequently as a means for social change. Some people, however, question this process and criticize freegans for encouraging and practicing a lifestyle that is based on race and class privileges. I argue that although this criticism is somewhat deserved, it is more indicative of other primitivists groups who use the same practices for expressive and narcissistic aims. The purpose of this study, then, is to demonstrate that freegan expressions of primitivism do not always overshadow freegan social strategies. In essence: not all primitivisms are the same.

Keywords: social anthropology – freeganism – primitivism – privilege – anti-oppression politics – environmentalism – cultural strategies
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1. Introduction

Freegans are a body of critical consumers who choose to fulfill their needs—be it sustenance, desire, or other essential services—without participating in the formal economy. For them, this means buying nothing or as little as possible, in an effort to reduce what they consider the exploitative effects of capitalism and waste in particular. Alternately, freegans employ provisioning activities such as urban foraging, turning abandoned spaces into vegetable plots, eating roadkill, living nomadically, being more in tune with one's senses, eating and learning about wild foods, living without possessions or basic utilities, and avoiding work in 'unnatural' environments or work altogether in favor of helping each other, living in community, and spending more time with friends and family.

I suggest that these practices can be studied in relation to ‘primitivism’—a cultural strategy that advocates a return to nature, or alternatively, a return to a more ‘wild’ spontaneous state of being. Although this link between freeganism and primitivism could be valuable to study, its examination is almost absent from the existent literature on freeganism.

Problem Formulation and Purpose

In this study, I discuss the relation between freeganism and the cultural strategy of primitivism. Using freegans as the core example, I explore Friedman’s statement that “the past is always practiced in the present, not because the past imposes itself, but because subjects in the present fashion the past in the practice of their social identity (Friedman, 1992: 853).” As I will show, freegans use primitivist practices in urban environments, and frequently as a form of activism. The freegan ability to live for ‘free,’ however, is questioned by many who see this as a self-centered expression of a privileged group of individuals. I argue that although this criticism may be legitimate, it is more indicative of other primitivists groups who use the same practices for narcissistic and expressive aims. The purpose of this study, then, is to demonstrate that freegan expressions of primitivism do not always overshadow freegan social strategies. Ultimately: not all primitivisms are the same.
As I will explain, when primitivism becomes more about identity than strategy, it is usually conveyed in a narcissistic project, one in which the desire to discover a ‘wild’ state drives many individuals to reject their middle-class backgrounds and isolate themselves in the search for the ‘primitive.’ This type of primitivists claim to sacrifice their privileged status, but their privilege is often substituted by neo-primitive experiences that still mirror and reinforce the unequal relationships of mainstream society. I will argue, however, that the practice of the past cannot always be interpreted as an absolute expression of social identity. In the case of freeganism, primitivism can also be useful for social change.

Conventional views of this type of phenomena frequently link primitivism with either a return to nature or an unrestricted expression of the libido (Friedman, 1994). In this study, I will try to demonstrate that, although freeganism is certainly influenced by these aspects, its relation with primitivism does not necessarily entail full-blown regressive or expressive escapism. Instead, I will argue that freegan expressions of the past are used for both strategic and identity purposes, and other groups of primitivists are more inclined to use the latter. These groups I divide into the more radical, _anarcho-primitivism_, and the more moderate, _bourgeois primitivism_. Like freegans, both of these primitivisms seek a personal self-realization derived from a more frugal existence in balance with nature. However, they tend to use primitivism for expressions of social identity and individualism more frequently than freegans. In different but still significant circumstances, both freegans and primitivists tend to overlook the race and class privileges that are embedded into their lifestyles while claiming to make sacrifices for a better future—for themselves and the planet. Freegans, perhaps more than any other group, have articulated these sacrifices and made them public.

**Literature and Theory**

Previous literature has mostly focused on freeganism as a social movement. New York City freeganism is the most documented case. It has been described as movement based on anarchist principles (Ernst, 2010; Shantz, 2005) and as a strategically centered movement that uses performances to recruit followers and attract media attention (Barnard, 2011). There is a tendency to interpret freeganism as disengagement from capitalism (Gross, 2009; Clark, 2004) or
as a subculture (Edwards & Mercer, 2007) that engages in tactical anti-consumerism (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). Freeganism has been alternative contextualized as ‘associative power (Crane, 2012)’ and as an ‘autonomous food space (DiVito Wilson, 2013).’ A few authors, moreover, have studied freegans in comparison to animals (Corman, 2011) and in relation to other groups, such as anarcho-punks (Coyne, 2009) and back-to-the-landers (Gross, 2009).

At first glance, primitivist interpretations of freeganism seem pretty obvious. So obvious, perhaps, that they have gone unnoticed. To my knowledge, only one author (McTaggart, 2008) relates freegans (she uses the term ‘urban anarchists’) to primitivism. Although most studies have overlooked this link to primitivism, I believe further investigation could lead to a better understanding of other environmentalist and ethical groups that share similar visions of nature and past societies.

Most influential to this study, however, have been McTaggart (2008) for associating the experience with primitivism, Corman (2012) for unveiling the privilege dimensions of freegan practices, and Barnard (2012) for focusing on the collective strategy over individual expression of freeganism. I collected much of the empirical data of freegans from the NYC-based website freegan.info. I also include theories from Friedman (1994, 1992) and Alberoni (1984), which are relevant for understanding freeganism as a reaction to the decline in modernity and as a nascent state movement. I also draw on new social movement theory (Melucci, 1996), alter-globalization (Chesters & Welsh, 2006), and anarchist studies (Day, 2005).

**Preview of the Organization**

I organize the body of this study into three main chapters. Chapter Two deals with freeganism as a whole—that is, its ideology, practices, and different forms of participation. Chapter Three presents the relation between freeganism and primitivism, exploring the examples and meanings of this theme. Chapter Four treats the practical problems of primitivism and its interaction with race and class privileges. Finally, in concluding chapter Five, I return to the issue of freeganism as an expression of the primitive and how it can help us understand the differences between socio-ecological movements by evaluating the particular types of primitivism that they espouse.
2. What Is Freeganism?

In the last decade, an interest for ethical consumerism has flourished. Slow-food, voluntary simplicity, and other environmental movements have reached the mainstream. All of them share a growing dissatisfaction with the global food industry, as well as a desire to re-connect with simpler ways of provisioning grounded in nature (Gross, 2009: 58). These sentiments have also been embodied and manifested in varying degrees by anarcho-primitivists, punks, and the core group of this study: freegans.

Freeganism is about intentionally trying to meet everyday needs without participating in the formal economy. One way of doing this is by recovering waste. It is not to be confused, however, with waste picking as done by the homeless or by millions of people in the global-South. Freeganism is typically a lifestyle choice; a philosophy of deliberate simplicity that advocates the use of autonomous subsistence practices to decrease engagement in the conventional economy. Similarly to the alter-globalization movement, freeganism challenges the commodification of human needs such as food and housing, and opposes the overexploitation of resources, which is manifested and exposed by Freegans to the public in the form of waste.

Food—the essential type of waste for freegans—is easily found in supermarket bins. The majority of supermarkets throw away food that has passed, or is soon going to pass, its sell-by date. They also throw it because of how it looks: part of the package is damaged, or one of the products is turning bad. On many occasions supermarkets will throw food that is perfectly fine, because of overstock, economical reasons, or minor defects in the food or product (e.g. a broken egg in a box of twelve). Freegans recover this food through dumpster diving—which consists in pulling out food or other items from the garbage. No matter how expensive, delicious, or exclusive these items might be inside the store, every night many of them can be found in the trash. For grocery stores, these products are not good enough to sell. For freegans, it is more than a free lunch; it is a serious ‘crack’ in the system (Holloway, 2010)

The word freegan first appeared in the pamphlet Why Freegan? written by Warren Oakes (former drummer of the punk rock band Against me!). He defined freeganism as an “anti-
consumerist ethic about eating.” The term combines the words ‘free’ and ‘vegan.’ Freegans can be vegans in the sense that they are against buying animal-based food. However, they are not always against eating it if obtained for free. That is one key aspect of the freegan philosophy: protesting capitalism “not by abstaining from consumption, but by abstaining from paying for their consumption (Portwood-Stacer, 2012: 94).” Freegans see this as way of “weakening the system.” They believe that by abstaining from buying and working for ‘the man,’ they are removing material value from the system without injecting it back in. Freegans move beyond the standard boycotting of products they consider unethical, into a position that addresses the violence of the whole ‘system’ and therefore refrains, in so far as they are able, from purchasing its products:

Freeganism is a total boycott of an economic system where the profit motive has eclipsed ethical considerations and where massively complex systems of productions ensure that all the products we buy will have detrimental impacts most of which we may never even consider. Thus, instead of avoiding the purchase of products from one bad company only to support another, we avoid buying anything to the greatest degree we are able.  

A Brief History of Freeganism

When looking for the roots of freeganism, some authors (Gross, 2009; Halpern, 2010) point out to the anarchist street theater group from San Francisco, known as the Diggers. During 1966 and 1967, the Diggers salvaged surplus vegetables from the markets and offered free food to those in need. Like freegans, the Diggers sought to create a free society—free from money and capitalism—and they opened free stores, provided free medical services, and staged numerous free concerts and theatrical events around the city.

The movement of Food Not Bombs (FNB) is also credited as a major influence of freeganism. FNB can be described as an anarchist network that recovers, prepares, and serves vegetarian food in public spaces for free to anyone who is hungry. Nevertheless, they do not usually obtain food from dumpsters, unless the stores are unwilling to cooperate and give away the food they are not going to sell. Therefore, the novelty of freeganism is not socialist distribution of food, squatting,

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1 What is a Freegan? Available at http://freegan.info/
2 Freegan Visions. Available at http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-philosophy/freegan-visions/
or do-it-yourself (DIY) practices (most of this has been practiced before, albeit in different forms); the novelty of freeganism is their approach to food and waste. To this, I would add, the freegan use of primitivist practices within the city, which is interesting because, in contrast to other groups, they do not radically shy away from civilization.

**Freegan Practices**

Although dumpster diving (DD) remains freeganism’s central practice of avoiding to purchase products, freeganism also extends to practices such as squatting, urban gardening, train hopping, bicycle repair, wild food foraging, refusal of work, DIY, shoplifting, corporate scams, and mutual aid. I argue that freegans frame many of these practices in terms of primitivism. Freegans often contrast technology and civilization to hunting and gathering societies, which are praised as examples of a more balanced life. Urban foraging, in this context, becomes a way to be more in touch with the ‘primitive’ self, by avoiding the alienation of commercialism, and directly gathering resources from the urban landscape. That way, they argue, one becomes more in tune with one’s natural instincts and recovers a meaning of life that was lost:

> We harken back to older ways, where people lived as participants, not masters in the continuum of life. We remember our nomadic foraging ancestors. Living in the cities and suburbs that have replaced the wild, we forage, recovering the usable goods wasted by a society that values artifice and image over substance and value. ²

Nevertheless, not all freegans engage in these activities. The level of participation is different, and these are only examples of what certain individuals who call themselves freegans encourage and/or practice. In reality, however, only a few committed freegans are able to ‘drop out’ and lead a completely ‘free’ life. Although many appear to be interested in squatting and voluntary unemployment, only a minority incorporate these choices into their everyday life (Barnard, 2008: 425). It should be noted that the extent of squatting largely depends on the specific economic and legal frameworks of their location.³ Many freegans have to pay rent, and thus, cannot avoid some form of wage labor. Certain places are easier to live for free, but how much for free freegans

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² *Freegan Visions*. Available at http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-philosophy/freegan-visions/

³ NYC, for example, is far from a squatting paradise; very few buildings are left empty, or standing, because of expensive land values, and the police uses many resources to find and evict squatters (Barnard, 2008: 440).
choose to live remains an individual question. As we will see, there is a great diversity in levels of participation, commitment, and motivation.

The term ‘freegan’ is a broad denomination for people within Western capitalist societies that seek a life of scarce, or non-existent, commercial consumption, through the use of autonomous provisioning activities (DiVito Wilson, 2013). Nonetheless, any person who fundamentally agrees with the freegan philosophy, limits his or her consumption, and engages in one or more freegan practices, could be labeled as a freegan. According to the first paragraph of What is a Freegan? freegans are:

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

As we can see, freegans often define themselves in opposition, or in relation, to consumerism. In Melucci’s terms, they could be considered an antagonist movement, because they challenge the way society produces, distributes, and obtains resources (Melucci, 1996: 35, Chester, 2006: 98). Portwood-Stacer argues that by employing acts of resistance to overconsumption, freegans do not only subvert, they also produce and engage in lifestyle practices that are meant to suggest an opposition to consumerism (Portwood-Stacer, 2012: 88). Therefore, some forms of anti-consumption are more than an actual abstention from consuming; they are also part of a body of practices that is directed towards achieving the goals that freegans envision.

As with other movements, the motivations behind these goals are complex and frequently overlap each other. For instance, ‘eco-gastronomes’ of the slow-food movement are both driven by an aesthetic pleasure of food and by the sustainable ethics of eating local (Sassatelli & Davolio 2010). On the other hand, bourgeois primitivists turning to ‘green’ products are concerned with the environment as a whole, and with their individual and family health (Correia, 2012). Similarly, freegans aim to eat as healthy as possible without contributing to the

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4 What is a Freegan? Available at http://freegan.info/
commodification of food (Gross, 2009: 71). Freegans have access to baked goods such as pizzas and pastries, but some refuse to eat them on basis of health. Some of them prefer to dumpster or shoplift from health food stores (Clark, 2004) and others try to steer off their dependency on trash by foraging wild plants or growing their own vegetables (Gross, 2009: 71).

Freegan strategies, however, are best illustrated in the NYC scene, where participants arrange ‘trash tours’ (rigorously planned dumpster diving events) to attract interest to the issue of waste (Barnard, 2011). They do so in strategic ways by choosing times and locations that are best suited for public outreach. For example, during trash tours they display expensive or rare scavenged foods on the sidewalk, and hand it out to pedestrians in an attempt to, as one freegan explains, “[show] people all the good things that get thrown away (Barnard, 2011: 430.)” As Barnard notes, in this case, freeganism becomes less about acquiring food for free and more about showing a problem and raising awareness. Moreover, by not being limited to a group of people or confined to an obscure location, trash tours facilitate recruitment. Bystanders can quickly become participants by picking out something from the trash. This accessible and concrete form of action differs from more diffuse ones that emphasize ideology, formal commitment, or education. Here bystanders can easily become part of the group; there is no membership or work involved.

Trash tours are also known for the ‘Waving the banana’ speech: a carefully crafted speech that introduces the main tenets of freeganism, explains common practices, and invites listeners to participate in the movement. The speaker role is reserved to those freegans with more experience, which demonstrates again the strategic nature of freegan.info. Barnard observes that, while many ‘Waving the banana’ speeches mention the freegan “opposition to the food system,” speakers rarely reveal their opposition to the system and much less their opposition the capitalist system. Nancy, a NYC freegan with experience in advertising, explains that speakers should find implicit ways of criticizing capitalism. A good speaker, she says, should “slip in the message” and relate to people instead of haul out the “vocabulary of ideology (Barnard 2011: 436).”

In NYC trash tours, a ‘media wrangler’ is assigned to control what the media photograph and whom they speak to (Barnard, 2011: 430). Because of the different levels of knowledge and
experience among freegans, the ‘wrangler’ makes sure no newcomer gets cornered and interviewed by the media. In spite of this carefulness, Freegan.info has been open about speaking to the media. They see it as an opportunity to ‘spread the message,’ and this disposition distinguishes them from other groups who choose to conceal dumpster diving activities for fear of losing food sources (Edwards & Mercel, 2007: 291). According to Barnard (2012), Freegan.info have sometimes risked food sources for the movement goal of waste reduction. This was the case when a major chain of stores decided to change their practices for dealing with surplus food after having seen images of the store’s waste in a news report about freegans. This illustrates how freegans have actively used the media with intentions of showing the abundance of food waste and ultimately reducing it.

Although the freegan philosophy and practice is often oriented towards living a less technological life in balance with nature, this does not always become an explanation for escapism and isolation. For freegans, being in touch with the ‘primitive’ self does not necessarily mean abandoning civilization. The conception of the ‘primitive’ takes divergent forms and is always embraced differently. In this case, freegans employ social strategies to try to make society more in tune with their values. On some levels, lifestyle-based consumption remains an instrument with activist motivations and directed towards conventional social movement goals (Barnard, 2012). On other levels, freegan practices of ‘consumption’ are not always strategic or aimed at revolutionary change; these practices have multiple functions, which freegans use to fulfill a diverse range of goals (Portwood-Stacer, 2012: 102). Nevertheless, as I will try to show in this study, primitivist practices and sentiments have played a major role in food and environmental movements.

**Freegan Participants**

Most authors describe freegans as white, young, and middle class (Edwards and Mercer, 2007: 282; Crane, 2012; Croman, 2012). Research on North American freegans and anti-consumers shows that the majority of respondents were college students, but that the ethnic and economical backgrounds were diverse (Portwood-Stacer, 2012: 103). Kurutz (2007) article in the New York Times further illustrates this variety: while most freegans in NYC are young, middle class, and
left leaning, some are older individuals who had jobs until they dropped off the capitalist ‘race’ to pursue a more ecological lifestyle. Foden finds that many of the participants in UK are “high in cultural capital, often educated to degree level or beyond, but not necessarily in economic capital (Foden, 2012: 154).” This means that although freegans choose to limit their income and work less, most of them are typically middle-class in their education and know how to climb the economical ladder in society if needed.

It generally appears that freegans are educated, young, and independent. They consciously try to distance themselves from over-consumption, and they shape their lifestyles in accordance to their beliefs. They usually live in Western cities, or suburbs, and in some occasions, they have a nomadic lifestyle and travel cross-country, especially those who follow the seasons in search of wild foods. For example, the freegans in Gross’ study had lived in “4 to 15 places over the last year (Gross, 2009: 68).” On the other hand, some freegans are more organized than others. Freegans in NYC, for instance, cultivate their rhetoric and media presence in great detail to effectively show the problem of waste and the freegan solution to the public. Today, many freegans are in contact with each other through social media. Both Lund (the student town where I live) and Malmö (the largest city in the south of Sweden) have active ‘Dumpster Diving’ groups in Facebook where participants upload pictures of their ‘catches’ and recommend good dumpstering locations in their city.

But who is a freegan? Is everyone who dumpster dives a freegan? When speaking about those who dumpster dive for reasons other than necessity, not everyone could be considered a freegan. Dumpster divers have diverse goals. Some are more concerned with individual gains and do not necessarily adhere to any political, ecological, or social aim. A good example of this is John Hoffman (1993), an author who advocates lying and taking advantage of homeless people or other individuals to gain as much as possible from the dumpsters. He encourages readers to “dominate those dumpsters and throw the competition crumbs, not concessions. Only the lean and hungry shall survive (Hofmann, 1993: 61).” In contrast to freeganism, this type of dumpster diver does not want over-consumption to end. In fact, he hopes he still can find waste in the future and even daydreams about the futuristic products he will one day recover from the trash.
Freeganism, on the other hand, involves a certain social consciousness and effort to not only live off this wasteful situation, but to try to change it. Coyne distinguishes between anarcho-punk dumpster divers and freegan dumpster divers. In practice, the two are very similar. Coyne broadly associates anarcho-punk dumpster diving to the Black Cat Café example in Clark’s study (2004) and to the lifestyle of the anarchist collective CrimethInc—especially to their published book Evasion (2003), in which an anonymous author narrates how he managed to travel without money and without work by engaging in dumpster diving, shoplifting, and squatting. Coyne argues that, for the author in Evasion and for other anarcho-punks, these practices are often like ‘games’ that aim to prove how easily the system can be usurped, and they are more closely connected to a philosophy of ‘opting out’ of society, in contrast to freeganism, which Coyne describes as being more concerned with informing and ultimately changing society rather than only disrupting its rules. I would place this category of anarcho-punk close to the anarcho-primitivist one that I will later discuss, since anarcho-punks are often guided by a similar desire to find a ‘wild’ state.

If taken to an extreme, Coyne’s argument disregards the diversity and complexity of engagements and politics within anarcho-primitivism. Nevertheless, in concrete aspects, his argument brings up fair comparisons between freegan and other approaches to dumpster diving. For instance, Coyne describes the anarcho-punk dumpster diver as being frequently limited to a place and a subculture (which can be said more often of anarcho-primitivism or anarcho-punks than of freegans). Although the punk and anarcho-primitivist movements are politically framed, their ‘form of engagement’ is certainly more antagonistic to society. Freeganism has succeeded in transmitting its message to the mainstream without arising as many fears and dangers as punks and anarcho-primitivists. As Coyne writes, “freegan politics are available to anyone who wishes to read the website, join a Food Not Bombs group, or save money on their groceries.”

It is worth noting that some freegans consider themselves to be anarcho-primitivists (Barnard, 2011: 431) and some are, or have been, influenced by the anarcho-punk movement (Clark, 2004). There is not always a clear line separating these groups. Some individuals have been dumpster diving since the 1990s without ever considering themselves freegans. Nevertheless, I think freeganism could be seen as a continuation of anarcho-punk dumpster diving, but with a
more refined engagement to the public.

As I have mentioned above, freegans have been partially spared from the demonization of the media (Coyne, 2009: 21). Their ‘radicalism’ is usually portrayed as an eccentric way of life—as weird people who eat trash. In some occasions, they are ridiculed and dismissed; however, they are rarely depicted as ‘folk devils’ (Chesters & Welsh, 2006: 81). This distancing from ‘fear’ is important because it suggests that the movement is more inclusive and potentially more accessible to people. Unlike anarcho-primitivists, which are often linked to menacing images of ‘eco-terrorists’ or the Unabomber, freegans are not portrayed as delinquents, but as weird people who are not afraid of dirt. Therefore, they are rarely seen as a direct threat to democracy or civilization, as much as other deviant groups (Chesters & Welsh, 2006: 75). This is not to say that freegans are always free of suspicion, public fear, or persecution. But, in general, they appear less dangerous to the public.

This chapter has aimed to outline who freegans are, what they do, and what they believe in. I have introduced some of the differences between types of primitivisms and described their main practices. In next chapter, I will deal more in depth with primitivism as a whole.
3. Primitivism, Modernity, and Freegans

According to Jonathan Friedman, the West is now living in the shadow of modernity; while Western hegemony fractures and modernist identity loses its value, we are experiencing a “new search for salvation” in the form of cultural movements that seek to re-establish roots, revive religious rites, and resurrect ethnic or national identities. These, Friedman explains, are characteristic of a period of confusion—symptoms of the “dissolution of the Self,” which in its absence, turns to the experience of the Other in search for answers and schemes of survival (Friedman, 1994: 188).

One of these life-strategies is primitivism, “a revolt against the order of rational civilization and champion of the libido as the natural creative energy of humanity (Friedman, 1994: 227).” Whereas modernism encourages separation from both nature and culture, primitivism encourages a return to nature, favoring spontaneity and unrestricted expression over the constrained order and self-control of modernism. Therefore, primitivism is often the cradle of artists, youth movements, and experimental religions. According to Friedman, the unlimited development of modernism is usually tied to periods of growing hegemony and commercial imperialism, while primitivist, traditionalist, and post-modernist strategies manifest themselves more notably in times of crisis when modernism is not longer the best strategy to survive (Friedman, 1994: 227).

Melucci (1996) characterizes primitivism as ‘regressive utopianism’ and its manifestation as ‘quasi-religious.’ In the case of freeganism, there seems to be a connection between myth, primitivism, religion, and identity that could be explored in future research. For instance, Melucci (1996) explains that the mythical search for a ‘Lost Paradise’ usually translates into forms of escapism and fundamentalism, because when movements in the nascent state define their identities in relation to the past (Alberoni 1984: 60-64), they often employ a ‘totalizing myth of rebirth,’ which reduces reality into a fundamentalist search for transcendence:

The ‘religious’ content may become a cultural form of resistance against the instrumental rationality of dominant apparatuses. But very often spiritual search can turn into a totalizing myth in which to base identity (Melucci, 1996: 104).
This, moreover, exemplifies the common objection to primitivism: its association with either a return to nature or an unrestricted expression of the libido (Friedman, 1994). In the coming sections, I aim to discuss the ways in which primitivism influences freeganism. I focus on the broader relation with primitivism, not the specific interactions with activism, organization, and privilege. To reveal a broader perspective of this relationship, I also divide primitivism into two illustrative poles: the radical (anarcho-primitivism) and the moderate (bourgeois primitivism). I borrow the concept of bourgeois primitivism from Correia (2012). He uses this term to describe affluent environmentalists who advocate an anti-consumption lifestyle and relish images of a pristine nature and the simple life of the past, while placing especial value on the individual rewards therein. Downshifting, voluntary simplicity, intentional living, and the Slow movement, could all be considered groups and practices that fit into the bourgeois primitivism description. Anarcho-primitivism, on the other hand, is a well-known anti-civilization tendency within the anarchist movement, popular for the works of John Zerzan, one of its most ardent defendants, and by anarcho-primitivists groups such as Green Anarchy, CrimethInc, and Earth First!

My aim here is to understand how these life-strategies are reflected in the freegan way of life. By articulating these two examples and contrasting them with freeganism, I hope to convey a clearer sense of freegan primitivism.

**Types of Primitivists: Freegans, Anarcho-Primitivists, and Bourgeois Primitivists**

Although not mentioned by Friedman as such, we can perceive similarities between primitivism and what he calls the Fourth World strategy and the ecological strategy. Friedman explains that these two cultural strategies are ‘natural allies.’ The Fourth World strategy manifest itself as “exit from the system, the formation and/or maintenance of culturally organized communities that are self-sufficient and politically autonomous (Friedman, 1994: 192).” As a cultural movement, Fourth World strategies usually aim to re-enact a former way of life or identity that has been repressed. They are usually egalitarian and traditionalistic in nature, rejecting modernity and standard notions of development. The writings of Adam Weissman, the author of freegan.info, suggest how freeganism could be understood in this light. “So what’s the alternative?” he asks:
Before production, before industry, before agriculture, even before the advent of the ritual hunt, humans provided for themselves through direct communion with nature’s bounty […] The land was not owned and food was not a product. People consumed to meet their needs and, with little opportunity for waste or overconsumption. The only producer was Earth itself […] Humans existed as equals with other animals and the earth, not as owners, conquerors, ‘stewards,’ or destroyers. (Weissman, 2008)

This alternative to capitalism clearly exhibits an admiration, if not a longing, for pre-historic modes of existence. Freegans, however, do not constitute new societies based on repressed identities of the past; instead, they form “experiential collectivities (Friedman, 1994: 186)” that are based upon beliefs of the primitive relationship between man and nature. In this aspect, freeganism draws closer to the ecological strategy. Friedman categorizes it as closely related to traditionalist/religious/ethnic strategies, in which “the individual feels the acute need to engage himself in a larger project in which identity is concrete and fixed (Friedman, 1994: 191).” Freegans, moreover, attempt to use these notions and practices in an urban context. This, I believe, is what makes them different. They want to integrate themselves harmoniously with the natural world, but they find ways to do this within the city.

McTaggart notes that this “willingness to integrate the urban structure into neo-primitive skills […] suggests an understanding of these tropes as tactics rather than absolute descriptors of anthropological or social identity (McTaggart 2008: 318).” Perhaps, the urban adaptation of primitivism is what sets apart freegans from anarcho-primitivists. The former adapts to urban civilization, and wants to improve it—make it more ecological—while the latter does not try to save it—it wants civilization to collapse. Anarcho-primitivists believe there is no way humans could end social stratification or ecological degradation without giving up technology, the division of labor, and the large-scale domestication of plants and animals. Therefore, they argue that humanity and the environment would benefit from a return to a hunter and gathering subsistence (or at least, towards small-scale farming or permaculture). In this respect, they are more accord with the fundamentalist reaction to modernity that Friedman ascribes to the ecological strategy. For anarcho-primitivists, civilization is simply unsustainable.

Bourgeois primitivists, on the other hand, seem more concerned with making the existing society more sustainable. They speak of ecological footprints, of no net impacts, and of local
consumption. They want change in the political system and in individuals, but not in civilization as such. While they are critical of technology, they are not against it. They prefer ‘eco-effective’ technologies (Correia 2012: 106). Bourgeois primitivists savor the idea of primitive life, but perhaps not the pre-historic. They like the countryside and the simple life of farmers, but are usually content to remain in the city or suburbs. Although they want to go back to basics, they do not use as many primitivist practices as freegans do. Instead, they try to reduce and change their consumption habits. They reuse, employ DIY (do it yourself) solutions, exchange products with others (using websites like freecycle), buy from farmers’ markets, use less water and electricity, install solar panels, do away with possessions, use a bicycle, or take the stairs instead of the elevator.

It bears mentioning that bourgeois primitivism is not the same as green capitalism. The latter supports buying green products but ultimately not reducing consumption, while the former demands sacrifices. These sacrifices, however, are touted as a way to improve ‘quality of life.’ Bourgeois primitivists explain that these restraints help us to overcome the existential angst of consumerism. Through the act of ‘downshifting’—reducing consumption, possessions, and hours of work—we become freer and healthier, which in turn allows us to be more connected with nature, the people around us, and our life as a whole.

REVEL in simplicity. Learn to live with less. Learn that the full richness in life doesn’t come from possessing trinkets. Stop looking for products to complete you and find wholeness in community, purpose, wilderness, etc.  

Freegans, as the quote above shows, also adhere to the principles of downshifting. This ascetic renunciation could be interpreted as a sacrifice; nevertheless, as Alberoni (1984) points out, the ‘things’ they renounce to have already become superfluous in the nascent state; individuals do not longer need them, because a greater satisfaction comes from the experience of the nascent state itself, “from being together, searching together, and fighting together (Alberoni, 1984: 75).” Alberoni compares this to two persons falling in love: the important thing for them is being together; everything else becomes secondary. Therefore, in freeganism and other new

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5 Consuming with Conscience: Beyond the 3 R’s. Available at http://freegan.info/what-is-a-freegan/freegan-philosophy/consuming-with-conscience-beyond-the-3-rs/
movements like bourgeois primitivism the needs are reshaped. Some needs that were insignificant are granted more value, and others that were important are now ignored (Alberoni, 1984: 74-75). For instance, needs like food and closeness to nature become central for freegans and other primitivist groups, while cars and branded clothes do not. This does not mean that they become indifferent to pleasure. Nature, for primitivists, becomes an essential source of pleasure and happiness. Alberoni notes that sensibility is more pronounced during nascent states: the members of groups experience new tastes in food, aesthetics, and relationships that were perhaps not valuable to them before. As a result, they are sometimes perceived as an incoherent group who speaks of being frugal, ascetic, and revolutionary, whilst being hedonistic, pleasure-driven, and narcissistic (Alberoni, 1984: 76).

**Primitivist Motivations and Boundaries**

Freegans are similar to bourgeois primitivists in their appropriation of the city as an environmental battlefield. Both, in their own way, set out to make the city more sustainable. As I mentioned earlier, freeganism could be seen as the younger, more radical brother of the ‘downshifting’ crowd, whose age and wealth is usually higher than freegans (Edward and Mercer, 2007: 291). Their focus on self-improvement is also similar, albeit less focused on the minimization of work and possessions, provided that freegans are generally younger, and quite often students. Both freegans and bourgeois primitivists, however, explain that as a result of not being manipulated into buying false needs, they are able to experience a sense of freedom and joy that does not depend on commercial consumption. They say that this deviation from the mainstream allows them to be happier, as they do not have to constantly reach for mainstream standards of beauty and success (Portwood-Stacer, 2012: 96).

As moral consumers, both freegans and bourgeois primitivists aim to live with integrity, which for them means: trying to live in accordance with one’s values, and particularly, feeling “responsible for the concrete impacts one’s consumption has on others (Portwood-Stacer, 2012: 96).” This moral responsibility extends not only to other people or other beings in the present moment; it also extends across time towards future generations of people and the future of the planet itself.
It's about the sort of world I want my own children to grow up in and the values I want them to have ... We're wearing and we walk and we drive around in the earth's resources and they're finite and it's important that we pass that on to our kids, because if we don't, you know, we're gonna end up in even more trouble than we're in now (Foden, 2012: 156).

Freengans understand the impacts global manufacturers have on environments and societies around the world. Therefore, when freengans or bourgeois primitivists choose not to purchase a product, they feel they act morally. Many of Foden’s respondents also show that for many it is about trying to live better, not perfectly (Foden, 2012: 157). Some freengans believe that if enough people stop buying, the capitalist system might come to a halt. Such argument echoes Holloway’s idea that “revolution is not about destroying capitalism, but about refusing to create it (Holloway, 2010: 254).” Similarly, they also think that their actions might inspire others and change society as a result. Thus, a bourgeois primitivist who buys organic food from the farmers’ market is, in a way, acting on activist motivations because she thinks she is withdrawing resources from the corporate system by putting her money into a better cause. Both freengans and bourgeois primitivist, then, understand and configure their everyday practices “as rhetorical acts with the capacity to persuade and inspire others (Portwood-Stacer, 2012).” Their lifestyle becomes a case of “lead by example (Coyne, 2009: 14),” or prefiguration to prove and show viable alternatives to capitalism (Portwood-Stacer, 2012: 98; Graeber, 2002). By improving their lifestyles, making them more attractive to the outside world, they somehow become rhetorical agents that seek to convey a different world with their actions (Del Gandio, 2008: 189).

Practices of anti-consumption also create solidarity within freengan and primitivist communities. Portwood-Stacer (2012) explains that the lifestyle choice of reducing one’s consumption can be seen as parallel to the spending of the upper-classes, in that the two want to show and sustain their affinity to a larger group, or ‘imagined community,’ of anti-consumers and consumers, respectively. In the freengan and anarcho-primitivist milieu, certain habits and practices are more valued than others. Some anti-consumption practices, for instance, may boost the member’s status within the group. In such context, dumpster diving or squatting might give more cultural capital than buying local or organic. Anarcho-primitivists, in particular, have erected strong boundaries between them and the rest of the world. As O’Neil explains, they reject almost everything that is not anarcho-primitivism, but when they do this, they also create a sense of
belonging among those who share similar views:

Anarcho-primitivism is a highly autonomous political-cultural field of restricted production (oriented towards other producers), in contrast to fields or large-scale production (produced for general audiences). As in all marginal fields, the production and exchange of cultural artifacts represent the means for primitivist actors to engage in the genuinely felt rejection of dominant norms, whilst also exhibiting their underground distinction from mainstream, or ‘common,’ culture (O’ Neil, 2008: 254).

Although anarcho-primitivists reject technological development, they still engage in online debates to compensate for the limited space of discussion that anarcho-primitivism enjoys in everyday life. They advocate biocentrism: an ethical perspective that ascribes equal value to every living thing. They identify with the natural world and want to speak for it. Nature is their ‘love object.’ They are not as hesitant in their articulation of the enemy unlike freegans, bourgeois primitivists, and other related movements that do not usually name a unique source of the problem—globalization, capitalism, the banks, the state, the food system, and politicians, are all possible answers for these groups. Anarcho-primitivists, on the other hand, identify the enemy as civilization. Technology, states, and ecological degradation, are all outcomes of the unalterable root problem that is civilization. The only solution now is to dismantle it.

Anarcho-primitivism, then, does not share the unclear identification of the enemy that is common to nascent states (Alberoni, 1984: 29). The opposite is true for freegans and bourgeois primitivists. They still do not point their finger at one and only enemy. They have many enemies, and these can still be saved and converted; ultimately, they think these can be convinced and liberated by the truth (Alberoni, 1984: 29). This is evident in their efforts to display what they are doing, by showing the problem of waste and consumerism. Both freegans and bourgeois primitivists are dedicated to talk about their experiences and their lifestyle changes to other people. Anarcho-primitivists, on the other hand, generally keep more to themselves and their own kind. They have a strong identity, which is more akin to nationalism, and most of them seem to have a desire to affirm who they are, or wish to be, by placing robust boundaries and differentiating themselves from others who do not share such views on nature and society.
In summary: freegans and bourgeois primitivists share a similar focus on self-improvement and morality. They both view lifestyle changes as rhetorical acts and enablers of social change. Their anti-consumption practices seem to create solidarity and a sense of belonging between members of the groups, as well as a distinction from the rest of the world. In the case of anarcho-primitivists, these boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are even more accentuated. For them, civilization is the indisputable enemy. Freegans and bourgeois primitivists, by contrast, do not have a clear enemy; they have many adversaries that can be converted. The freegan ideology, then, seem to be influenced by both critical views of civilization and romantic perspectives of nature. Although many of the practices and ideologies are similar in all primitive groups, they should not be conflated into one primitivism. As I am trying to show, they are very different. These differences are particularly relevant in their views of work, time, and alienation.

**Workers of The World . . . Relax!**

Anarcho-primitivists view mechanical time, and linear time before it, as a form of domination. They considered it an invention that runs counter to nature. According to John Zerzan “the degree to which a culture is ruled by time is a pretty exact measure of its alienation”6 Freegans, and bourgeois primitivists of the ‘downshifting’ and ‘Slow movement,’ also refuse mechanical time to some extent. The Slow movement, however, aims not to eliminate time completely like anarcho-primitivists; instead, they try to slow down and reduce the stress of fast-paced lifestyles by more effective time management:

We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods. To be worthy of the name, Homo sapiens should rid himself of speed before it reduces him to a species in danger of extinction. A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of the fast life. May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long lasting enjoyment preserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency (Petrini 2001: xxiii).

Freegans also want a different configuration of time that is more in tune with their lives. How, where, and with whom they spend their time is crucial for them. Therefore, they seek a life far

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6 John Zerzan interviewed by Derrick Jensen. Available at http://www.alexmackenzie.ca/enemy_of_the_state.pdf
from monotonous wage labor (Edward and Mercer, 2007: 291). By choosing to spend their time foraging for food instead of working to buy food, and squatting instead of working to pay rent, they engage in a different conception of time that is still linear, but not completely guided by the mechanical clock. In a sense, freegans liberate their time:

As freegans we liberate not only goods but also the moments of our lives. Hours not spent carrying out the hollow directives of bosses are instead spent free, since we don’t need to make money to acquire goods that we won’t buy.7

Anarchist and anthropological perspectives on work have clearly influenced this side of freeganism and anarcho-primitivism. Bob Black (1985) describes modern, and particularly industrial civilization, as being structured around work and separated from what he refers as ‘play.’ He criticizes both the market and the state as being propellers of this work mentality. Drawing from Marshall Sahlins’ *The Original Affluent Society*, Black argues that hunter-gatherer societies do not make such clear divisions between leisure and work. Moreover, most of us today engage in superfluous, boring work, and the majority of this work should be abolished, according to Black. Whatever useful work is left should be transformed “into a pleasing variety of game-like and craft-like pastimes, indistinguishable from other pleasurable pastimes, except that they happen to yield useful end-products (Black, 1985: 11).”

Bourgeois primitivists also criticize work, but generally not as a rejection of industrialism or capitalist modes of production. Instead, they tend to focus more on their personal well-being. Colin Beavan, author of “No Impact Man,” exemplifies this search for a balance between work and personal life:

Many of us work so hard that we don’t get to spend enough time with the people we love, and so we feel isolated . . . those of us lucky enough to be well compensated for these sacrifices get to distract ourselves with expensive toys and adventures—big cars and boats and plasma TVs and world travel in airplanes. But while the consolation prizes temporarily divert us from our dissatisfaction, they never actually take it away (Beavan, 2009: 8-9).

7 Freegan Visions. Available at http://freegan.info/
Working less and consuming less is thus offered as a solution to the common dissatisfaction of the middle and upper-middle classes. Although freegans criticize the capitalist system more thoroughly, they also emphasize the emptiness of leading an alienated life. Against this emptiness, the call of the wild represents a more meaningful path:

But this emptiness, shared even by those at the upper strata of political and economic power, is the emptiness of an animal far from home, separated from family and community, detached from a history of eons lived as part of a tapestry of life. We hear faintly the call of that which we were part of, that which we were and maybe can be again.8

As Friedman explains, primitivism is hierarchically opposed to evolutionism and civilization. For primitivists, nature is above civilization, while for evolutionists civilization is above nature. Both, however, tend to view the world separated into these two opposites. The only difference is their personal evaluation of each (Friedman, 1994: 5). For anarcho-primitivists human sanity and well-being can only be reached through nature. They equate civilization with pathology. Similarly to freegans and bourgeois primitivists, they talk about the increasing unhappiness of modern life. Again, this is used to highlight the mistake of the civilizing project, in contrast to the better life of tribalism:

Human unhappiness within civilization is widespread and growing. People feel increasingly empty, anxious, depressed, and angry. Everyone is seeking an answer to serious mental problems […] This is exactly where we are in history, at the crossroads between two radically different futures. On the one hand, there is the danger of insanity, and on the other, the opportunity for a return to tribalism (Parton, 2005: 239)

For anarcho-primitivists, the future of civilization is saturated with anguish and insanity. They urge people to return to smaller scale societies and overthrow the techno-industrial system of civilization; doing anything else, they say, is bringing on the disaster. Like bourgeois primitivists and freegans, they announce an impending ecological catastrophe, dramatically emphasizing how oil-depletion, climate change, over-population, and global famines are soon down the road. These, of course, are reasonable concerns. There is nearly scientific consensus about the environmental problems of the near future. Nevertheless, anarcho-primitivism and other

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8 Freegan Visions. Available at http://freegan.info/
Primitivists usually rely on anxieties over looming socio-ecological collapse to make a point (Correia, 2012: 117).

**Primitivism; or, The Idealization of The Simple Life**

As we have seen, freegans, anarcho-primitivists, and bourgeois primitivists see nature as a source of sanity and well-being. Many of their choices are inspired by the pursuit of a simple life in harmony with nature. The conception of the simple, however, takes different forms. For anarcho-primitivists, the meaning of the simple life is usually an existence lived off-the-grid, far from technological and industrial progress, in a natural environment that is free from the constricting rules of civilization. They enjoy being able to provide for themselves, be it through hunting, small-scale farming, wild food foraging, or, if they live in the city, urban foraging. Anarcho-primitivists also aim to rekindle with their ‘wild’ senses by direct, instead of mediated, experience. They try to fashion their everyday life to give more place to unmediated experience. They refer to this process as *rewilding* or *going feral*, and it is antagonistically positioned against civilization:

> I want to experience this vital energy again. I want to know the free-spirited wildness of my unrepressed desires realizing themselves at play. I want to smash down every wall standing between me and the intense, passionate life of untamed freedom that I want. The sum of these walls is everything we call civilization, everything that comes between us and the direct, participatory experience of the wild world (Faun, 2005)

Nature is their ‘love object,’ or rather, their love subject. They assign to it personhood, and as such, they usually either mystify it or worship it. Technology, on the other hand, is given supernatural powers, fetishized, made into a living thing. For anarcho-primitivists, *the machine* is not neutral; it is political, and it is becoming an immanent threat to life that must be eliminated. One could argue that freegans, and bourgeois primitivists in particular, are usually less concerned about ‘the machine’ itself and more about its immediate effects. Technology is seen as the engine of capitalism. It brings problems to our health, our environment, and our social relationships. It alienates and enslaves almost every form of life in this planet. The simple life, they claim, is usually devoid of these problems. Although freegans show less neo-luddite tendencies than anarcho-primitivists, they still look back to the past or even to present tribal
societies as an example of a desirable life.

Bourgeois primitivists, on the other hand, do not idealize as much the primitive as they idealize abstract images of an untouched nature, like Correia explains, “nature is remade in the image of the bourgeois consumer, i.e., orderly, pristine, non-human (Correia, 2012: 111).” Kapferer claims that culture in traditionalistic movements is always fetishized; it is made into a concrete object, “something which can be separated or abstracted from its embeddedness in the flow of social life (Kapferer, 1988: 2).” In primitivists groups, it is not culture but nature that tends to be refined into an object of devotion, and sometimes, even commodified. According to Friedman, this commodification and transfiguration of space based on nostalgic images of the past is common to the postmodern consumptionist strategy (Friedman, 1994: 192). Bourgeois primitivism appears to bear some elements of this condition. They are preoccupied with health, safety, and urban aesthetics. They worry about mercury in tuna, pesticides in food, pollution in air and water, and therefore buy organic food, drink bottled water, and wear face-masks in traffic (Correia, 2012: 111). These are important aspects that draw bourgeois primitivists to environmentalism. It is not only about society or the planet; rather, a simple lifestyle and a greener city, is also a means for bourgeois primitivists to temper their own fears over a decaying nature (Correia, 2012: 111).

As this chapter has shown, primitivism is far from being a monolithic movement. In practice, different groups embrace different sorts of primitivism. They do not all seek to rewild or go back-to-the-land. Some get in touch with the ‘primitive’ by leading a greener lifestyle in the city, others forage and live nomadically from town to town, and some people choose to simplify their consumption, work less, and grow food on their balcony. Regardless, most of them draw inspiration from past societies and consider contact with nature to be an essential part of life. They each try to minimize the influence of modernity by participating in activities that reminds them of other, more natural, ways of being.
4. Freegan and Non-Freegan Primitivism and Privilege

The practices of primitivists are subject to much debate. The dumpster, the squat, and the nomadic lifestyle, have become hotbeds of contradictions, blurred spaces shared by different social classes, which are said to be more accessible, and devoid of consequences, for people who are not previously framed as poor. Living for ‘free’ and voluntarily detaching oneself from the economical relations in society, as freegans and other primitivists attempt, have arisen questions about privileges that have not yet been fully addressed.

*The purpose of this chapter, then, is to illustrate the ways in which freegan and non-freegan experiences of primitivism manifest and affect others.* In the previous chapters, we have explored the different meanings and functions of primitivism in different groups, and the results show that, by applying primitivist skills and strategies in activist projects, freegans seem to ascribe more tactical and metaphorical value to primitivism, in contrast to anarcho-primitivists, who tend to seek primitivist experiences in isolation and regard primitivism as a basic tenet of their identities.

In this chapter, I will try to show that the act of *becoming*, or identifying oneself with the ‘marginal’ or the ‘primitive’ does not usually benefit either the marginal groups or the intended project of social change. In certain instances, integrating primitive aspects into one’s lifestyle can be useful to accomplish social goals (e.g. when freegans try to raise awareness of the issue of waste and consumption through their primitivist practices); nevertheless, the awareness of how privilege plays out through these practices is frequently overlooked, and some people claim that primitivist lifestyles tend to be sustained by race and class privileges. In the meantime, some groups from the Left have started, in recent years, to educate themselves about their privilege, and anti-oppression activists have stressed the importance of understanding the double nature of oppression before becoming agents of change.

Privilege is clearly becoming a popular concept in the discourse of social movements, as well as a controversial term in everyday life, which makes studying its different expressions a challenging endeavor. I will try, nevertheless, to unearth some of the links between the issue of privilege and the cultural strategy of primitivism.
The Boycott of Privilege

Several of the interviewees in Portwood-Stacer’s research came to refuse middle-class consumer values when they first learned about, or identified, with anarchism. They started to differentiate between what they considered ‘needs’ and ‘luxuries’ (such as owning a car or having “a stable home”). They also rebelled against standards of hygiene by refraining from ‘unnecessary chemicals’ such as “mass marketed soaps, shampoos, and deodorants (Portwood-Stacer, 2012: 91).” Eventually, many of them became vegans, and some, started dumpster diving. Among these changes, dumpster diving was perhaps the most radical. The act of searching for food in the trash collides with middle class values of cleanliness and the conventional view of this type of behavior, which is generally associated with the ‘untouchables’ like the homeless or the poor (Clark, 2004: 28). Freegans are aware of this stigma but, since they consider commercial food to be a privilege of the global system of injustice, as an act of protest they choose to ‘sacrifice’ some of their privilege by eating food from the dumpsters. The Why Freegan? Manifesto explains it this way:

[...] Other folks are literally starving so that we can have fully-stocked shelves at our supermarkets and health food stores. If this concerns you (as it should) you can protest the unbalanced distribution in America and the world by sacrificing some of your privilege and feeding yourself off of the ridiculous excess of food instead of consuming products from that supermarket shelves we are so unjustly privileged to have access to (Oakes, 1999).

Dylan Clark indicates that by doing dumpster diving, punks and anarchists with White or middle class backgrounds, are able to suspend or discontinue “their affiliation with a White, bourgeois power structure.” Thus, for some punks, “the downward descent into a dumpster is literally an act of downward mobility (Clark, 2004: 28)” or “class-suicide (Weitzenfeld, 2009).” On the other hand, for those who are or have already been down the ladder of privilege, or who are historically associated with being so, activities such as dumpster diving may understandably be less appealing. People of color, for instance, are often hesitant about participating “in activities that (further) mark or shame them as poor (Corman, 2011: 46).” Even the poor and the homeless (the groups who are most often associated with dumpster diving) have a certain aversion for dumpster diving. When asked about the activity, a black homeless man says that “it is degrading
to look through the trash, I would never go that low (Barnard, 2008: 430).” Corman explains that people positioned as ‘Other’ usually prefer not to engage in freegan practices due to oppressive legacies from the past. Moreover, the oppressed people who do “will likely experience greater risk and consequences than those who are not similarly positioned (Corman, 2011: 48).” Royce Drake, a black male who identifies himself as a freegan, addresses this situation in a blog about vegans of color:

Freeganism is a largely white middle-class movement (that seems to forget that poor folks have been eating garbage forever). And when I’m dumpster-diving I seem to have a few more issues to deal with, as a Black male, than my white comrades. They aren’t nearly as afraid of the police (or security), or threats of calling the police (or security), nor do they get harassed by law enforcement while diving to the degree that I do. I got harassed by security several times while diving on my own campus, until my white friends pop their heads out of the dumpsters. I’m also extremely embarrassed for people to see me diving, because I can tell that I’m not just me, I’m also a representation of Black people in general (Drake, 2009)

A commentator named Meep attest to this feeling of embarrassment, saying “I’ve gotten things from around the dumpsters, but I don’t tell my family because it’s sort of shameful.” Johanna, who also joins the conversation, thinks there are freegans of color but “they just would never name themselves as such because the term is so white-identified.” In another blog, an Afro-American woman writes that she is not into dumpster diving because she felt that it “trivialized the situation of some people who do not have a choice between purchasing food and foraging for it (Weitzenfeld, 2009).” Drake’s post also draws attention to the relationship between freegans and the police. Although civil disobedience has proven useful in plenty of social movements, white people acting ‘rebellious’ and declaring fearlessness of the police have seldom addressed how the result of this advice is not equal for all—since whites have fewer chances of getting imprisoned and abused than people of color do. In response to Drake, Amalgamated also notices this disparity of attitudes between white and freegans of color:

[…] many of my white friends have completely different attitudes towards the police than I do...I still have to deal with being the only brown person in these situations without them understanding my increased paranoia. They are more violently anti-police in general, I suppose, and I'm more afraid of them, yet, they don't get it.
People of color have more reasons to be afraid of state violence, since they are statistically more affected by it. As the writer of another blog points out: “for dumpster divers of color, the police aren’t so much a symbol for the hated enemy as they are a real force to be feared (Weitzenfeld, 2009).” This anti-police ‘rebelliousness’ is epitomized by CrimethInc. Ex-Workers Collective, a very influential group for anarchist-inspired grass-roots movements such as freeganism, which has been described by Graeber and Grubacic (2004) as “the greatest propagandist of contemporary American anarchism.”

**CrimethInc’s Militant Unemployment and Lifestylism**

CrimethInc. members are generally too young to be considered ‘ex-workers;’ nonetheless, they call themselves so because they “believe they have moved beyond the metaphorical and tactical belief that the worker is the center of social change (McTaggart, 2008: 299).” Instead of working, they endorse ‘dropping out’ and cutting off their ties to the system as a way of “declaring the General Strike on an individual basis (CrimethInc. Ex-Workers Collective. 2006).” In a sense, they believe that if everybody eschews work in favor of autonomous ways of providing for needs, the capitalist system will collapse and give way to a more joyful world; a “secret world concealed within this one;” a world of fun, adventure, and revolution. They ask us to join them “in making the ‘revolution’ a game a game played for the highest stakes of all, but a joyous, carefree game nonetheless.”

These ‘games’ are the central theme of CrimethInc’s first publications (Evasion, 2003; Days of War & Nights of Love, 2001), which promote a creative and nomadic lifestyle sustained by dumpster diving, squatting, and shoplifting. In doing so, however, they frequently assume the reader has the same privileges. For instance, the back cover of Evasion reads: "Homelessness. Unemployment. Poverty. If you're not having fun, you're not doing it right." Upon reading this, it is not surprising to find that CrimethInc. is predominantly constituted of white middle-class youths. The autobiography of Evasion covers the travels of a white middle-class male who celebrates a life of playful disruption, anti-consumerism, and what he refers to as ‘militant unemployment.’ Absent from this, however, is any race or class analysis. The author does not

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9 *Your Politics Are Boring as Fuck.* Available at http://crimethinc.com/texts/selected/asfuck.php
mention that these games or adventures that allow him to survive without a job, are much more accessible and free of suspicion for white middle-class people (Crane, 2012: 361).

Another aspect is that, like freegans, CrimethInc. sympathizers have in average “spent far less time becoming entangled in the debt structure of capitalism (Coyne, 2009: 15-16)” and they have yet not given in to steady jobs (Gross, 2009: 63). Many are voluntarily unemployed. This has led some critics to dismiss the lifestyle because they consider it isolated from working class people. They claim that this type of ‘radicals’ usually end up being ‘escapists’ instead of revolutionaries:

CrimethInc begins with the brand name, and ends with the relentless merchandizing of "radical" products on their website. In between there is...an individualist, selfish, and inchoate rebel ideology that eschews work, political organizing, and class struggle. In a world at war and facing terminal crisis, CrimethInc's transcendental philosophy and ahistorical lightness is a form of intellectual masturbation. Like rootless ex-pats unconnected to the daily life around them, CrimethInc's lifestylism is a form of self-imposed exile within their own society (Ryan, 2004: 21).

Jeppesen, on the other hand, suggests that this criticism is part of a tendency within activist circles (especially anarchist) to compare modes of political organization and “create hierarchies among them (Jeppesen, 2011: 44).” She argues that while challenging people’s politics is important, it is also “detrimental to the movement as a whole to suggest that a person’s commitments are irrelevant or not revolutionary (Jeppesen, 2011: 44).” Moreover, CrimethInc has recently claimed that the real message behind freeing oneself from wage-labor is to re-direct one’s free time and energy into community action, movement building, and other forms of activism. They say their message has often been misinterpreted and recreated as a form of escapism and individualist strategy to evade work and spend time travelling or being ‘free’ with like-minded individuals.10 Likewise, freegan.info’s What is a Freegan? emphasizes that this free-ticket from work also means that freegans have more time to help others fight for a good cause:

By accounting for the basic necessities of food, clothing, housing, furniture, and transportation without

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10 All Traveller kids Purged from CrimethInc Membership. Available at http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/selected/purged.php
spending a dime, freegans are able to greatly reduce or altogether eliminate the need to constantly be employed. We can instead devote our time to caring for our families, volunteering in our communities, and joining activist groups to fight the practices of the corporations who would otherwise be bossing us around at work. For some, total unemployment isn’t an option it’s far harder to find free dental surgery than a free bookcase on the curb but by limiting our financial needs, even those of us who need to work can place conscious limits on how much we work, take control of our lives, and escape the constant pressure to make ends meet. But even if we must work, we need not cede total control to the bosses.

According to primitivist groups, their practices are initially directed towards social change, but sometimes get misinterpreted and used for self-serving purposes. This is not a unique trait of primitivism; in every group there are different levels of engagement, and some people are only in them for fun, fashion, or convenience, and others are fully committed members that dismiss most participation as dishonest or not revolutionary enough. In that respect, the primitivist rhetoric works like any other rhetoric: it idealizes, promises, and abridges a certain passion—in this case, ‘the primitive’—to attract and unite a group of people. But, as in any large community, people tend to express and have conflicting notions of social change. The next section will show a few examples of how this compelling narrative of primitivism unfolds in practice.

The Privilege of Primitivism

Groups like CrimethInc are intrinsically bound to anarcho-primitivism and other types of primitivist rhetoric. Even when they criticize consumerism or imperialism, they still overlook race and class privileges, and instead tend to focus on the ‘primitive’ thrills and individual rewards of a dangerous lifestyle:

[The shoplifter] lives by urban hunting and gathering. In this way she is able to live much as her distant ancestors did before the world was subjugated by technology, imperialism, and the irrational demands of the ‘free’ market; and she can find the same challenges and rewards in her work, rewards that are lost to the rest of us today. For her, the world is as dangerous and as exciting as it was to prehistoric humanity; every day she is in new situations, confronting new risks, living by her wits in a constantly changing environment (CrimethInc. Workers’ Collective, 2001: 240).

This search for the ‘authentic’ and the ‘primitive’ weave many practices together—the risky and careful tactics to obtain food by shoplifting, and the special knowledge and skills to thrive off the
urban landscape by dumpster diving, for instance, makes it look curiously similar to hunting and gathering ways of life. For some, moreover, squatting and urban foraging are ways of carving ‘neo-primitive’ existences out off the daily excesses of civilization. But then again, some critics argue that this break-away from civilization often turns more into a retreat for people who already have a privileged status within this very civilization.

Similar thoughts are exposed in the *Power Machine: A Lenghthy Discourse on the Nature of Squatting*, a biographical zine by a squatter from the Berkeley region. The protagonist, Hanna Potassium, observes that her status as a white former middle-class pervades her experience and the success of her squatting actions. She writes that for a 50-year-old black man, squatting out of necessity generally involves trouble with the landlord or the authorities, while for her and her friends, recreational squatting often proves to be quite easy. For instance, she writes that when the landlord bumped into them squatting, he did not complain but only told them to “keep the riff-raff [low-class people] out.” Right then, Potassium becomes conscious of the paradoxical nature of her squatting and of its questionable political potential. She realizes “she has not in fact removed herself from civilization. Instead, she has access to a ‘neo-primitive’ experience within the city only because of her status within capitalist society (McTaggart, 2008: 305).”

These could be first hand illustrations of the debate about *lifestyle anarchism*, first introduced by Murray Bookchin (1995). Squatters and anarcho-primitivists are disapprovingly labeled ‘lifestyle anarchists’ and contrasted to social anarchists who value ‘proper’ politics and community services over individual choices on housing, work, or diet. Social anarchists describe lifestyle anarchists as a “middle-class, escapist, feel-good subculture (Day: 2005: 21)” and they usually consider alternatives lifestyles to be in conflict with social struggle. They are seen as harmful to the marginal communities in which they establish themselves because they tend to become isolated, socializing and collaborating only with each other, and not with the entire community. Therefore, their squatting is frequently associated with gentrification (Day: 2005: 21).

In recent years, however, some anarchists have accounted for the criticism and tried to fix the contradictions. Moreover, more people are dropping-out by necessity, not only by choice, and another type of squatting arrangement (from which the community benefits) is earning
widespread approval. It is known as *urban homesteading* and, in contrast to squats that are said to contribute to gentrification, it has received public support in New York City because it promotes notions of hard work and community improvement instead of just living for free (McTaggart, 2008: 314). The squatters in urban homesteads, for instance, “learn to pirate electricity, replace plumbing, and set up alternative heating systems […] community gardens for vegetables and fruits, developing rudimentary ‘farming’ skills to benefit poor urban communities (McTaggart, 2008: 313-314).”

Food Not Bombs (FNB) is also praised as an example of collective activism that is related to freeganism. FNB members recover food that is otherwise going to waste and use it to prepare vegetarian meals, which they serve to anyone who is hungry at free cost. These meals usually take place in public parks and streets, but also at protests, worker’s strikes, and amidst natural catastrophes. In each city, FNB contacts bakeries and grocery stores, and arrange the pick up of discarded produce. FNB has no headquarters and anyone can start an autonomous chapter in their city. Today, the organization has more than 500 active chapters in over 60 countries. Despite its great reputation as a ‘non-branded tactic’ within the alter-globalization movement (Day, 2005: 40), FNB still receives criticism from people of color who consider this just another form of charity. In this case, one blogger writes:

> Food Not Bombs is a white supremacist movement. If you can’t see that you still have your blinders on. Fuck you is my response to white charity. All your romantic rhetoric about blurred lines between the servers and the served quickly enters the wastebin of reality with every chapter formed. For all those FNB chapters that rely on dumpstered food, I flip a finger to all you white college kids and middle-class punks hiding in drop-out culture, get your fucking privilege out of my face. Did it ever cross your mind that people of color cannot do as you do? Did it cross your mind that dumpster diving is a practice that comes with risks for people of color you know nothing about? And quit fucking up the dumpsters. Some people rely on them for survival; and boo on you that I have to point this out, but they shouldn’t be made to go to your once or twice a week “picnics” to get fed. Fuck corporations but fuck you too for controlling the underground food supply. White people, you’re still stealing (Kilwaii, 2009),

This prompts a discussion about the role of privilege in social movements. Should it be counteracted with anti-oppressive practices or should it be left to its own devices? According to anti-oppressive activists, individuals ought to acknowledge and understand privilege, especially
within activist groups. This, however, does not mean that collectives should recruit more people from underprivileged backgrounds. As Chris Crass, an author and long time member of FNB, writes: “The idea that we just need to get more people of color to join our groups is an example of how white activists have internalized white supremacy. It carries the idea that we [white people] have all the answers and now they just need to be delivered to people of color. (Crass, 2000: 1).” If more people of color joined FNB or freegan activities it would make the groups multi-racial, but not necessarily anti-racist. The military of USA is multi-racial, but who would say they are anti-racists? As Crass points out, some white people mistakenly think that “anti-racist consciousness develop through osmosis” just by sitting in the same room or eating lunch with a person of color. Although one can learn something about racism through interactions, this is not always practical or effective. Instead of doing nothing, however, Crass suggests white people “to work on racism together and not just wait until a person of color brings it up (Crass, 2000: 2).”

The response to social injustice, then, seems not to be downward mobility—to sacrifice privilege whenever it suits one’s mission—and neither is lumpenization. As Ramor Ryan (2004) writes, “it’s not enough to merely identify with the dispossessed; the task is to find common voice and organize with them.” Primitivist tendencies are not very strong in this respect. Although they address real problems of the world, they often fail to shape a relevant discourse that reaches people beyond their secluded activist communities. They seek a lifestyle change, a so-called revolution of everyday life, but many times forget about the more complex relations beneath daily life. Thus, according to anti-oppressive activists, an appreciation of how people can be both oppressed and oppressor is needed (Corman, 2011: 49).

In recent years, this anti-oppression narrative has gained popularity in groups of the Left. Activists have organized workshops and written guidelines about ‘checking [one’s] privilege’ and identifying oppression in social interactions. They usually emphasize personal development, education, and social etiquette to overcome oppressive relationships. However, without taking for granted the good intention and potential of these initiatives, I think they demand more analysis to see how useful they are in counteracting oppression as a whole. In some instances, the tendency to correct oppressive behaviours could in itself become a problem if it systematically
reduces complex economical and social problems to a personal level. That is, although removing oppression is certainly a desirable goal, focusing intensively on micro relations could ultimately detract attention from the larger problems that establish these divisions in the first place.

As this chapter has shown, primitivist experiences can work both ways, sometimes turning against the very principles they espouse. For instance, while squatting might question conventional notions of property, it might also contribute to gentrification. Freegans, however, seem to be more open to address and change these contradictions because they have not yet invested their whole identities on primitivism. As suggested in the second chapter, freegans in NYC have become very strategic and are usually concerned with social issues before identity expression. In contrast to anarcho-primitivism, the ‘primitive’ for freegans is usually metaphorical, functional, and inspirational: it drives them towards a life whose relations with nature and other people resembles that utopian ideal. It appears that, for freegans, primitivism has not yet become a basic element of their social identities. For this reason, freeganism might evolve towards a more collective goal than other groups of primitivists, which seem more concerned with the escapist and regressive aspects of their experience.

In this chapter, I have mainly tried to introduce some of the links between privilege and primitivism as well as help to inspire further questions regarding their different responses and solutions. As for now, primitivists and freegans (to a lesser extent) overlook many of the privileges that are embedded into ‘primitive’ lifestyles. As I previously indicated, some activists suggest solving this through the use of anti-oppressive politics and practices. But what are the implications of such practices, and what political transformations do they offer outside of activist circles? In which could acknowledging and checking privilege establish elitism within groups or make them less accessible to people? I leave many questions unanswered. Actual ethnographic material is needed to understand the potential advantages and disadvantages of anti-oppression politics—studying groups of freegans and their attitudes in respect to privilege could be a good way to start.
5. Summary and Conclusions

The aim of this study has been to understand the freegan and non-freegan uses of primitivism. I have argued that freegan primitivism is similar but also different from those tendencies that focus on the individual benefits of primitivist experiences. According to some individuals, privilege seems to pervade many primitivist practices, and freegans, among other primitivists, are criticized for overlooking the race and class implications of their practices, and turning their activism into a reinforcement of privilege. Although I have shown that privilege is present in many practices, I have also argued that freegans are not as inclined to use it for narcissism and escapism as other primitivist groups. One purpose of this study, therefore, has been to demonstrate how freegan expressions of primitivism do not always become expressions of escapism.

The results show that freegan primitivism is different from other types of primitivism (anarchoprimitivism and bourgeois primitivism) especially when it comes to activism. Freegans, like other primitivists, seek a simple life in consonance with nature, but for freegans this has not necessarily meant a return to nature or an absolute descent into escapism. Freegan primitivism seems less rigid than other types of primitivisms. Although most freegans share a critical view of technology and industrial civilization, this view is less uniform than in other primitivist groups, and it does not translate into the same attitudes towards life. For freegans, the meaning of the primitive seems, so far, more metaphorical, social, and tactical; it is generally not essential to their very mode of being.

As we have seen in chapter two, freegan primitivism tends to be used in activist, instead of narcissistic projects. This approach, however, is not always successful. Freegans are still criticized for not developing a consistent race and class analysis and for not examining the role of privilege in their movement. Nevertheless, I argue that since freegans are not completely attached to primitivism, their views are generally more adaptable, and they do not depend as much on primitivism for the practice of their social identities. From these correlations, I claim that freegans are more open to change.
This might sound a bit odd now, since this study has focused on controversial and, quite frankly, dogmatic material. I should point out that I might have over-emphasized the negative elements of freeganism. For a reader who is not familiar with the topic, the first impression of the group might not be one of flexibility. But there are obviously less problematic sides to freeganism that are not shown here. I acknowledge that I have left out many relevant aspects of the freegan experience, and perhaps, in an attempt to demonstrate the many types of primitivism, I may have focused too much on what freegans are not, rather than on what they actually are.

Overall, I think that, understanding freeganism as both a strategy and an identity expression of primitivism can help us reach a better understanding of environmental and social movements that share a similar focus on nature and the past. By examining and comparing the different approaches to primitivism that a movement espouses (anarcho-primitivism, bourgeois primitivism, or freegan primitivism) and discerning what related tendencies they promote (e.g. regressive, escapist, expressive, or strategist) we can gather a more complete picture of these social phenomena.

Future research may instead try to understand freegan primitivism by itself. In such case, the ethnographical approach might be more appropriate to investigate what freegans themselves think of primitivism and about life in the past or in forager societies. Are these real examples of the past or are they just idealizations? What kind of future do freegans envision? The hypothetical link between freegan idealization of the past and freegan idealization of the future might be a compelling research topic. Less abstract but perhaps more fruitful research could focus on the role of anti-oppression politics and practices within the freegan movement. Using freegans as an example, a research could study in which ways personal behavior and development relates to activism and anti-oppression practices.
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