

Adam Weissman holds packaged salads found in garbage bags as Cindy Rosin looks through other bags outside of a grocery. They are “freegans,” those who use alternative strategies for living, including “urban foraging” or “Dumpster diving.”

Freegan.info is a project of the Activism Center at Wetlands Preserve, “a volunteer-run, New York City based grassroots activist collective founded in 1989 as a project of the Wetlands Preserve nightclub.” For more information, visit www.freegan.info.

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<http://freegan.info>

WHAT IS FREEDOM?

Reclaiming the debris of America's appetite for consumption

BY JULIE DOUGLAS

Dumpster diving isn't just for the homeless or cash-strapped college students looking for textbooks to submit to book buy-back stores for cash. The can has been reclaimed by those known as “freegans.” The name is an amalgamation of “free” and “vegan,” and although the term “vegan” denotes a diet free of animal protein, including dairy—a lifestyle that some freegans embrace—there are no hard-and-fast rules about consuming meat culled from garbage.

In fact, the freegan philosophy extends not just to one's diet, but to every aspect of daily life, including avoiding making an impact on the economy by choosing not to hold a job and occupying unused spaces for living—more commonly known as squatting. And if you think this dramatic expression of opinion has shades of the Summer of Love, think again. Although freeganism is not a formally organized movement, it is serious about its message.

So why risk schlepping through human refuse for an unopened bag of salad two days shy of its expiration date? Because for some, it's a political statement in practice—the point is to eschew capitalism, in all of its forms.

The Sunday Paper recently spoke to Freegan.info co-founder and spokesperson Adam Weissman about his decision to abstain from a traditional job that supports corporations—and their impact on the environment, society and family life—in lieu of dedicating his daily efforts to the care of his family, as well as social and environmental activism.

Q How would you describe freeganism?

A A lifestyle, a philosophy—you could even go so far as to describe it as a movement. It's not an organization. However, [freegan.info](http://www.freegan.info) is an organization that exists to promote the freegan lifestyle through organized activities that teach people about freegan living strategies and the rationale for them.

How far does the network extend?

People are communicating on every continent except for Antarctica—several hundred people sharing ideas and ideals about living an ecologically sustainable life while minimizing their participation in capitalism.

In terms of our e-mail list, we're in frequent communication with people in the U.K., France, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil and some parts of Africa. There's a sense that because a part of freeganism is recovering waste [Dumpster diving], that it must be specifically related to affluent countries because they must be the

most wasteful, and even that's not entirely true. Many of the people we talk to who share a lot of our ethics and practices are in developing countries as well.

How long have you been practicing freeganism?

I've been a freegan for about 12 years, but in a sense, I've been shifting toward a more sustainable and more socially conscious lifestyle for a good deal longer than that. When I was kid I became a vegetarian out of concern for the violence that we perpetuate on animals every time we eat meat, and shortly thereafter, I became a vegan as I learned more about the suffering of animals in factory farms.

What about your housing? Are you a squatter?

I live with grandparents who are elderly. At some point in my life, I'll probably be a squatter, as many people in our group and movement are. For me, right now, it's more important to be supportive to my family. One of the benefits of not having to be employed 40 hours a week is that I can spend that time with family—rather than having to do what a lot of people do, which is get a job to pay someone else to watch over our family members as home health aides. Instead of outsourcing my family care, I'm doing it directly, and that's really important to me.

What's a typical day for you?

Very often for breakfast I'll eat a salad of wild greens that I foraged myself from locally

growing plants. In terms of wasted or foraged goods, it varies. I do some foraging day to day. I also keep some goods in a cooler with ice as an alternative to all the energy consumption that's being constantly powered by a refrigerator. There's such an abundance of goods out there that I can go out anytime and find enough food. I don't drive a car. All of my clothing was discarded. Pretty much all of my furniture was discarded. Almost all of my computer equipment was discarded. I buy no consumer goods or next to no consumer goods. I'm reclaiming my time in order to redirect my attention to society and family. My days are dedicated to social and environmental activism, and I work hard without pay.

So there seem to be several levels of freeganism—whether it's finding alternative food sources, squatting or spending responsibly, when you do make a purchase.

Yes and no. At the crux of the freegan idea is minimizing your participation in capitalism as much as you can in any way possible, including working less—in the sense of generating wealth for a corporation—spending less money and, as a result, providing less revenue for a corporation. Within that framework, freegans consciously avoid having any sort of benchmark for what's an acceptable level of freeganism. There's no purity test and certainly no purity contest going on. The freeganism movement—if you want to call it that—is much more focused on teaching people strategies on ways to survive without participating in an economy that freegans see as inextricable from violence, exploitation and environmental destruction.

You'll find that among many freegans there's a level of skepticism around the idea of buying socially responsible products and the idea that shopping more responsibly can save the planet. That's not to say in any given situation, if a freegan feels that they need to buy a product that they're not going to buy what they see as the least odious product. But at the same time, there is a very real sense that no matter what product we buy—no matter how much green marketing is attached to it—there's still a substantial level of exploitation in the production and packaging and distribution of that product, without exception.

What would zero-level exploitation mean for you?

It would mean not having a production-oriented economy, not having a society that strips natural resources into a mass-production system and employs people in joyless jobs to make low wages to generate wealth for corporations, various CEOs and investors. It would mean a society that was localized, consciously and ecologically sustainable that only used those resources that related to vital needs that recognized that other creatures share this planet with us and have an entitlement to do so and that we, therefore, have a responsibility to only use those resources that we really need. It would mean ensuring a society where everyone's basic needs are met—where we don't have billionaires on the one hand and starving people on the other. It would certainly mean not buying into an economy that does just the opposite of all those things.

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Jason Samuels looks through a Dumpster for edible food thrown out by an Au Bon Pain in New York City—just one of the ways freegans live a life “based on limited participation in conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources.”

STAN HONDA/GETTY IMAGES

What model would meet the freegan standards?

What we need is *not* a centralized authoritarian socialist bureaucracy, but rather a society that’s decentralized, where people cooperate on a completely voluntarily basis—questioning everything that we’ve been told in this consumer-oriented economy that we really need. Looking toward models in traditional societies—communal tribal societies where resources are shared.

Then you see democracy and capitalism as mutually exclusive?

I think that [they are] at fundamentally cross purposes. In fact, I think democracy can’t exist under capitalism and I think it doesn’t. [An] example is that the fact that we now have both parties aggressively pushing ahead on free-trade agreements with countries with some of the worst human rights records, like Colombia, South Korea, Peru and Panama, because corporations that finance electoral campaigns for politicians can gain great benefits from those kind of trade agreements. A society where money is equal to power—democracy can’t really fit.

Do you think that’s just human nature—that if people were provided with what they needed that they would still try to hold sway over another person because they may still have more of x than the other person?

That’s an interesting premise—the idea that competition is the inevitable component of human nature is a message that we have been very effectively programmed with within a capitalist society. And yet, if we study anthropology we find quite a different picture—that while competition has been an important evolutionary force, cooperation has been just as important. The value of cooperation has been underplayed because it has adverse propaganda value to [a capitalist] society. I would say that when we look at the way human beings have lived for the vast majority of our existence on this planet—and the way that traditional hunter-gatherer societies still exist—we see a very powerful counterargument [to capitalism]. It’s very possible to have egalitarian and sustainable cultures.

So how do you put the practical aspects into play?

In terms of how we see that in practice, we and people with similar philosophies organ-

ize events called “really, really free markets”—community events where people bring goods to share with others, things that might be cluttering their attics, food that they may have prepared, crafts that they may have made, artwork that they may have done. It’s a completely free market. In addition to goods, people offer classes, workshops, massages, yoga sessions, lectures and performances. When people realize that there’s enough to go around and that we can share, people are willing to be much more community-spirited and, in fact, altruistic.

But can this work on a larger scale?

These small examples are evidence that a fundamentally different model can work and *has* to work because the way that [most people] are living right now is destroying the capacity for survival on this planet. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has said that we have an outside chance of a six-degree change in climate by the year 2100, which scientists say basically means that we are very close to the end of all life on Earth. Other studies have said that that study was actually too conservative. Oil supplies are expected to run out within 40 years.

There’s no evidence that we have the kind of infrastructure to transition to an alternative fuel source in that time. Many people are saying that the kind of localized cooperative society that freegans are advocating may end up being a matter of practical necessity. We simply won’t be able to sustain anything else. It’s a matter of “Do we want to continue living with our heads in the clouds until we hit a very hard crash leading to resource wars and starvation? Or do we want to make that shift now in a more gradual and humane [way] so that when we don’t have those resources to use anymore, we don’t have that kind of catastrophic outcome?”

That’s quite a paradigm shift.

Until we make that point, a lot of people look at what we’re saying as, “That’s all very nice, but that’s very quixotic. It’d be great if we could live in a world where everyone shared and everyone cooperated.” But when you consider the petro-collapse, the point at which we run out of global fuel sources, it becomes less a matter of quixotic thinking and more a matter of hard pragmatism. **SP**



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