

Dumpster Diving

Date : January 26, 2013

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"Until the 19th century, the term 'to consume' was used mainly in its negative connotations of 'destruction' and 'waste'. Tuberculosis was known as 'consumption', that is, a wasting disease. Then economists came up with a bizarre theory, which has become widely accepted, according to which the basis of a sound economy is a continual increase in the consumption (that is, waste) of goods" (Petr Skrabanek 1994: 29).

The activity of rummaging through rubbish for usable things is known by many names: dumpster diving, freeganism, skipping, recycling and so on. As the communities of people involved in this activity are not exactly homogenous, with a common ideology, it is not too certain where the different terms originate. Nevertheless, I will denote here some of the connotations and ideas behind them.

Freeganism is often considered to be the most politically charged term in use. As the first known printed use of the word 'freegan' – the *'Why Freegan?'* zine from the end of the 1990s – declares:

Freeganism is essentially an anti-consumerist ethic about eating; asking "why freegan?" is essentially asking "why not consumerism?" /.../ By not consuming, you are boycotting EVERYTHING! All the corporations, all the stores, all the pesticides, all the land and resources wasted, the capitalist system, the all-oppressive dollar, the wage slavery, the whole burrito! That should help you get to sleep at night (Oakes 1999: 3-4).

When the term freeganism is used, it is often in contrast to capitalism or about freeganism's role in modifying it. The anarchist sociologist Jeff Shantz claims for example that freeganism is trying to evade capitalism by creating its own alternative economic system, inspired by Marcel Mauss's conception of the gift economy (Shantz 2005). As such, the term might also be the most controversial one for being too strict to some and at the same too ambiguous to others (Gross 2009).

(See also the Sydney doco [Bin Appetit](#) (YouTube 30March 2010).

Dumpster diving might be the most clear and easily graspable term for the outsider: 'dumpster' as the garbage bin or container where the items are retrieved from, and 'diving' as the activity

necessary to reach deep into the vast containers filled with goods. Dumpster diving or 'dumpstering' are probably the most well known terms in an international context, whilst others might be perceived as more local terms.

Skipping and skip dipping share the connotations of dumpster diving and are not as politically charged as freeganism. The difference seems to be geographical – 'skip dipping' is a term with clear Australian origin (Edwards & Mercer 2012) whilst 'skipping' is the term I heard from my informants who were either from Great Britain or had learned about skipping there.

The word most commonly used in Barcelona is recycling (*reciclar*) which has its congruous words in the languages spoken in the community. In Estonian, for example, the word is '*recyclima*' [*risaiklima*]. It can be said to have the same meaning as 'dumpster diving'. In this posting I mostly use this term, as it is the one my informants most commonly use.

Approaching the bins

A young man, we shall call him Mateo, yawns and stretches behind his laptop. It has been a tiring day of idleness. He does not work in the strict sense of the term. Today has been a usual day: he spent a number of hours planning tomorrow's dinner, as friends are coming over and he would like to cook something nice. He then played with his roommate's cat for some time and had something to eat. For a few hours he focused on the Wi-Fi problem – the neighbours' router seemed to be giving a weaker signal, so a few other neighbouring networks had to be cracked. Now, as noted, he is stretching his back. Suddenly he glances at the clock – it is almost half past eight! He rises at once and walks into the kitchen, reaching for two large grocery bags from one of the drawers.

Mateo was born and raised in the outskirts of Barcelona, in a neighbourhood similar to where he lives now – houses built on hillsides, a cobweb of steep streets intertwined with innumerable staircases, a population of mostly working class Catalans and immigrants. His parents are too, as he says, working class people, *trabajadores*. From his childhood, he remembers dumpster diving as a shameful matter – a question of pride and poverty; even children wearing hand-downs from older siblings were bullied at school, not to even mention families who went picking through garbage. Mateo did not start recycling himself before ending up in Amsterdam after he was thrown out of the apartment he rented in Barcelona. Once he returned to Barcelona, he simply continued to go recycling as he had in Holland.

We are walking uphill as he tells me this story of becoming a recycler. We take a sharp left turn and he points straight ahead: "See? There's Día". Día is the shop that we are heading to; its red sign in the shape of a percentage symbol can not be seen from this angle. I immediately recognise the cashier's red uniform as he steps out of the door of the shop, dragging behind him a full container of biological waste. We start moving faster, as Mateo tells me that the lady standing right next to the shop window is also a dumpster diver, and not the most generous kind. We reach the containers at the same time with the middle-aged lady (I later find out from a Polish squatter that

the lady is Russian). The cashier has brought out two bin containers, one biological – with the brown lid – and the other – with the black lid – mixed. The three of us flip open the lids. Mateo and I like to think of ourselves as recyclers with a lot of solidarity (a catchword among the anarchist-punk-*okupa* scene) running through our veins, so naturally we share all our findings with the Russian lady, who then melts up and offers us some of her own. All in all the result of this 15-minute walk and talk are for us: six packs (500 grams each) of some yellow sweet fruit unbeknownst to me; a lot of red peppers; some salad; a huge amount of carrots; a broccoli; a big bag of onions; a zucchini; five small yoghurts; and two bottles of Actimel. We head home with a big smile, because being able to not pay for our food makes us radiate with joy.

A prelude on squatting - Background and finding access



Anonymous recycling

All of the informants whose stories are embedded in my research are connected to the *okupa* scene of Barcelona. There are many, like Juan and Mateo, who are active and committed to the political side of the phenomenon. These are usually people who look for the best houses to squat and then take great care of the houses, keeping them clean and well hidden from enemy eyes. They are people who systematically take part of common events and help others when needed. Yet, some of my informants are not as political or as sustainable – spending most of their time sleeping, drinking, skate boarding and smoking pot. There is of course no general rule on the division of squatters, as it is a vibrant, heterogeneous and flexible community that resembles more a process than an entity. Yet it is safe to say that squatters with similar understandings of politics, activism and the *okupa* scene tend to live together in the same house, creating sub-communities that share the same worldview (Martínez 2007).

I had my first personal contact with food recycling in the summer of 2009 when I visited one of my best friends who at that time was living in Barcelona. Later, as my interest in food anthropology grew I decided to return to Barcelona and look deeper into this way of obtaining food that whilst considered more than normal (by being non-consumerist and thus more ethical) in some circles, is

despised and frowned upon in other levels of the society. I intended to use my friend as a key informant who would grant me access to the circles, provide me with a place to live and show me where the best bins were.

Unfortunately during my fieldwork the friend of mine could not be in Barcelona herself, which at first seemed to make things difficult. Luckily for me, we kept a good connection and talked on the phone several times a week. I could say that this was a good thing for my fieldwork – I arrived to the field with no previous connections, personal contacts and relations that could interfere with my objectives, whilst at the same time my friend could still provide me with enough names and contacts from afar so that I could easily find a place to live and people to turn to during my first days in the field. Also, as a personal side note, without my friend's mental support provided by a few phone calls a week, I am not sure if I could or would have been able to stay focused during my month in the field. As every anthropologist knows, the status of a would-be-anthropologist during their first time in the field is rather confusing, to say the least.

Although I had also intended to conduct interviews with non-squatter recyclers, it proved to be too time-consuming and difficult to form a trustworthy relationship with them once I had arrived in Barcelona. This was due to the lack of personal connections and shared spaces with non-squatter recyclers. The age group of my informants varies from 21 to approximately 33, with the majority in their late twenties. Most of my informants were either living or temporarily staying in one of the three squatted houses I had the most contact with. Only one of my main informants was from a different house. Five of my key informants were originally from Spain (three Catalan, one from Madrid and one from Zaragoza), others from various European countries or Latin America.

Garbage then and now - Or, food becomes food again

It is Thursday night. Although the sun is already setting, it is still unbelievably hot in the old town of Barcelona. I step run upstairs from the Jaume 1 metro station downtown, taking two steps at once. It is Food Not Bombs (FNB) night at the squat on Panses street and I'm hoping to get there before all the cooking starts. That is not an easy goal, as there is no time schedule in the squat and no certain time agreed on when to start cooking. At some point during the late evening, someone decides to start cooking and others who are in the house join him or her to help with the food or with serving. I hurry through the massive river of tourists that flows towards the beach at Barceloneta and head towards the tiny alleyway with cobblestones where the squat is located.

I have previously only been there once and not quite certain which dark smelly alley to turn into. Slightly worried, I nevertheless reach the right place, recognising it at once – the only doorway in the alley to be fully decorated (above it, the legs of a mannequin spread towards the street) yet without an actual door. In front of it, on the street, someone with a beard and a dog mounting an old bicycle. I go in from the empty doorway and run up the dark stairs to realise by the aroma in the hallway that someone has already started cooking. Three lazy dogs slowly jump off their chairs to greet me as I enter the dining room. People chopping, mixing, patting, smoking, and chatting

surround the large wooden table in the centre of the room. Two or three 1,5 litre bottles of Xibeca beer are passed around; someone is playing the guitar on the balcony; cramped to the corner, two South American boys are smoking pot and playing a very slow chess game. A thick cloud of food aromas and sweat smell steams from the kitchen corner where at least four people are trying to cook on three burners.

A dark haired skinny boy at the end of the dining table explains to me that they are making lentil cutlets with oatmeal and almond flour. He says he bought the lentils himself, because there is so much almonds in the house that he decided he wanted to use them for cutlets. The almonds, a 50 kg bag, were recycled from a dumpster behind a chocolate factory the night before. It had been quite a hassle to transport it back to the house, even more so because of the other oddity they had found – the front half of a huge chocolate statue of a brown bear. This statue is now the centrepiece of the corner table where most of the recycled food is accumulated. The sight is peculiar to say the least: next to a green pile of zucchinis, a sad-looking brown bear made of chocolate.

Let's take a closer look on the modern food cycle – on how capitalism and the neoliberal worldview have affected food production/consumption and why edible food fills rubbish containers, heading towards destruction. I describe the journey of a food item towards reaching the zone where it becomes repulsive to the consumer, focusing solely on commercial garbage bins – containers used by shops, super markets and food factories – excluding garbage containers used by households. The group under study refrain from dumpstering in household containers, preferring commercial ones. This is mostly for a rather prosaic reason: they say there is simply much more food in commercial garbage containers.

There are also figures supporting their claims. Although it is estimated that the European average food waste production consists of more than 40% of food waste produced in households and only 5% of food waste that origins from retail and wholesale, the same study shows a remarkable difference when looking at country-by-country data. Whilst it is estimated that Spaniards create 218 791 tonnes of household food waste per year, the amount of food waste created in retail and wholesale is astonishing: approx. 1 244 846 tonnes per year (Monier, Hestin, et al 2011). This is an extraordinary difference compared to other European countries. Another reason for disregarding household garbage bins by my informants is tightly connected to my research topic – namely, personal rubbish is conceived as more disgusting than public waste (c.f. Rotberg & Rabb 1985; Stoller 1989).

According to my informants, commercial garbage containers are filled with food for reasons that could roughly be divided into three categories:

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Food that presumably has low aesthetic value for the possible consumer (vegetables that

are too big or too small; vegetables with visual effects of ageing: spots, crinkles; food with packaging that has been damaged etc.);

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Food that is reaching or has reached its 'sell by' or 'best before' date;

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Foods that are in the same package with a damaged food item (i.e. a bag of oranges with one mouldy orange, a box of eggs with one broken egg, a six pack of beers with one bottle broken and so forth).

In a nutshell, these are foods that give the possible consumer the feeling of not being 'fresh' enough. Needless to say, this food is actually by in large edible. To understand better how and why this came to be, let us look at the history of the modern food system – how it was born and where it is right now.

An historical overview

With the large-scale urbanisation of the 18th century in Europe self-sufficient food production in households became nearly impossible – there just was no room to grow your vegetables or animals any more. This accelerated during the last 200 years to a food system where almost everyone is more or less dependent on the global food economy. As free market economy widened to an international extent, the processing and growing of food items and agricultural products moved to the so-called Third World, where labour and land are cheaper and the requirements for safety and lower environmental impact demand smaller or non-existent investments. This made food production cheaper and led to a situation where it is cheaper to grow food materials *en masse* in the 'developing' countries than to produce the necessary amounts of vegetables and meat locally. Food became abundant and globalised. Gretel & Pertti Peltó have defined this as 'delocalization' in their study of dietary changes in different human populations since 1750:

By "delocalization" /.../ we refer to processes in which food varieties, production methods, and consumption patterns are disseminated throughout the world in an ever-increasing and intensifying network of socio-economic and political interdependency. From the point of view of individuals and families at any one place on the globe, delocalization means that an increasing portion of the daily diet comes from distant places usually through commercial channels (1983: 507)

They emphasise that the dietary changes associated with delocalization have had contradictory results in different parts of the world – while more industrialised countries have seen a leap in better nutrition, less industrialised countries have, on the contrary, seen a degradation of nutrition levels due to the spread of the so-called cash crops. Although market liberalisation and the introducing of cash crops are mostly hoped to better the general economic situation of a given 'developing' country and to enhance the living conditions of its rural population and farmers, this is often not the case; as the increasing prices and social standards lead to bigger living costs, the agricultural reforms may even end up worsening the situation (Ponte 1998).

Yet, this kind of relationship is not anything new. Starting with historical luxury goods such as tea, coffee, sugar and (other) spices, food consumption has been tightly connected with the power relations between the North and the South, the richer and the poorer, 'us' and 'them'. One of the most thorough works on this interdependence is Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1986) in which he draws a global yet detailed picture of the relationships surrounding sugar, how it evolved in time and how it has effected the economic and social development of the modern world. According to Mintz, sugar was the first crops that led the way to a capitalist system of food production. Sugar farming in the Caribbean and its importation to Europe laid out the foundation for a global food economy. Although Karl Marx might disagree when labelling this type of production as capitalist (capitalist production is based on labour selling, not slave labour), Mintz considers it to be one step before capitalism, a sort of pre-capitalist stage.

Along with the syrupy lines of sugar becoming an everyday commodity for the masses, the consumer society began to evolve, bringing along an ever-increasing appetite for cheap foodstuffs. And where consumerism flourished, a wave of food waste followed shortly afterwards. Basing her work on Baudrillard's theory of consumption the eco semiotic concentrating on garbage, Riste Keskaik, claims that "[e]xcessive production of trash is not simply a feature of the consumer society; it is its basic structural-functional aspect" (Keskaik 2004: 37). In the neoliberal culture based on consumerism, wasteful behaviour and excessive waste creation are paradoxically the very instruments to give birth to an illusion of affluence:

In a way, it is the same with affluence: for this to become a value, there has to be not simply enough, but too much. /.../ This is the function of waste at all levels. /.../ [I]t is waste, in some way, which orientates the whole system (Baudrillard 1998 [1970]: 45).

As demonstrated by my informants – none of whom reported any health issues as a result of

consuming discarded foods – as a result of these three reasons there are massive amounts of edible food converted into the waste/dirt category. This can be seen in relation to a need of seeing food as 'fresh' and 'clean' by the consumers.

Freshness and cleanliness can be connected to the concept of 'healthism' as used by professor of medicine Petr Skrabanek. In *The Death of Humane Medicine and the Rise of Coercive Healthism* (1994) Skrabanek describes the long history that food consumption (diet) and (not) dying have – how the two have been connected through times and still are. He shows how the line is drawn between the 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' – wrong and right, pure and impure. We eat what is considered to be good for our health, so that we would live a 'good' life and, if possible, not die at all, or at least live as long as it is possible.

Superfluous amounts of waste, especially edible food accounted as waste, that create the possibility for dumpster diving are a trait of the consumer society based on a neoliberal view on food as commodity and also on obsessive healthism. But we must not rush into conclusions and misinterpretations. Waste in itself is a much older concept than a passing tendency in the economic interpretation of the surroundings. In the next paragraph I will try to give a better description of the category of rejected matter in order to see how and why cultures position themselves in relation to it.

What is waste?

Garbage, trash, waste, rubbish are terms that all denote the same category, the category of rejected matter. This rejected matter has been discussed in structural anthropology as the zone between nature and culture, a liminal zone of being a part of both, yet neither. Mary Douglas has famously called dirt – rejected matter – “matter out of place”. Her structural approach ties the existence of dirt directly to a system of symbolism:

Dirt /.../ is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity (Douglas 2001 [1966]: 36).

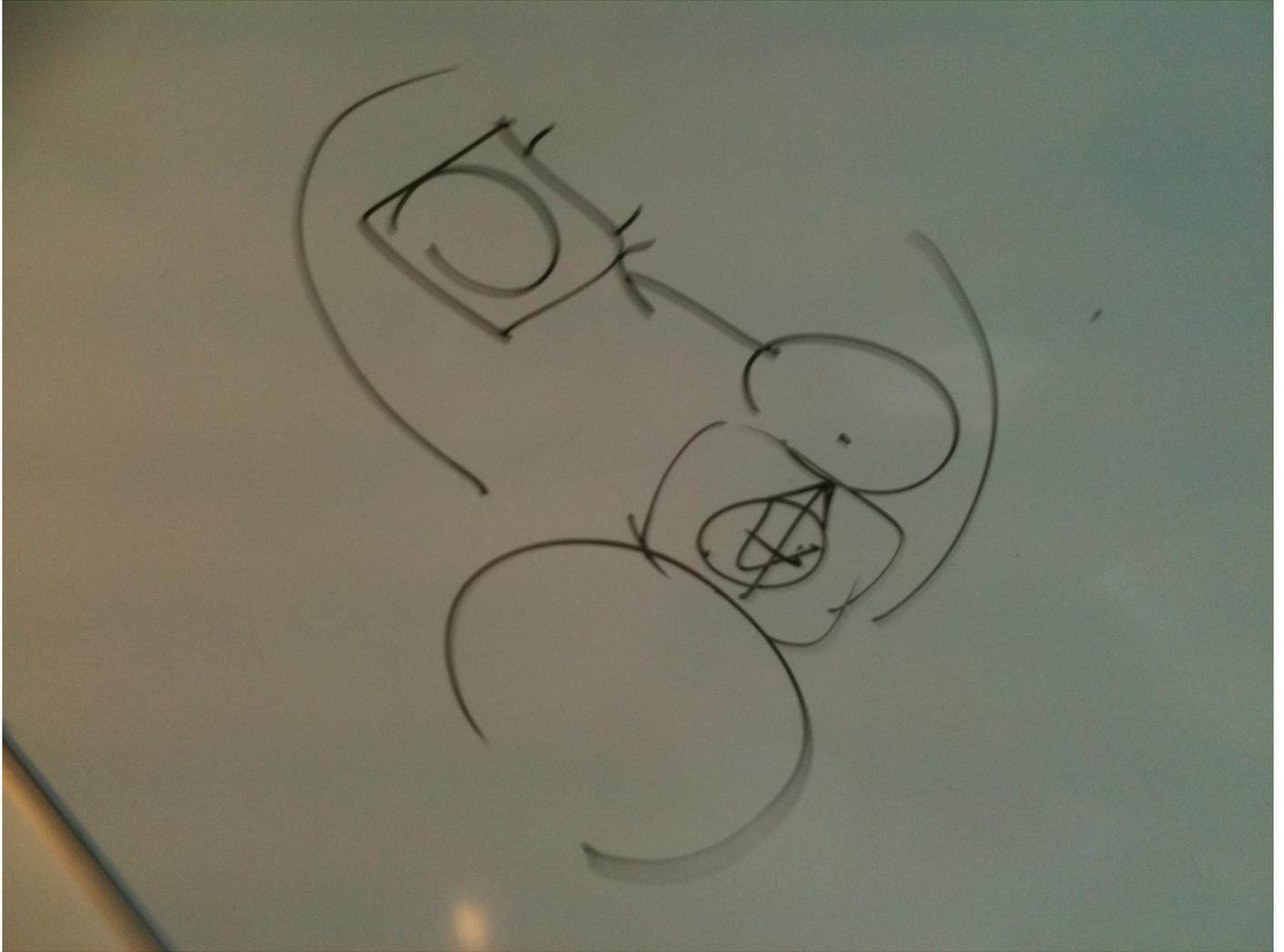
A thing becomes polluting or dirty in relation to its context, to the system of classification surrounding it as a symbol – a broom standing in a corner is not dirty, but a broom placed on a

dining table is. Dirt is the opposite of order, of systematisation. Dirt is a destructive yet creative power, a process of change constantly breathing down purity's neck. According to Douglas, all societies base their notion of dirt and pollution on symbolic categorisation, regardless of whether or not the society has knowledge on bacteriology and hygiene; the categorisation of dirt exists in all cultures, despite of economic or historic developments (Douglas 2001 [1966]). This notion of dirt is closely related to the philosopher Julia Kristeva's idea of abjection that brings dirt and pollution to the realm of psychoanalysis. Kristeva takes Douglas's notion of dirt and connects it to the feeling of repulsiveness necessary for defining oneself and rejecting all ambiguous matters in order to categorise the surroundings and to position oneself towards them:

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior /.../ (Kristeva 1982: 4).

In the ambiguity, the being and not being, the phase between life and death of dirt, of waste, is what makes one feel an uncanny presence of death, bringing about abjection, repulsiveness. In the third chapter I will discuss abjection more thoroughly in relation to the notions of edibility and inedibility that arise somewhat naturally when thinking of eating discarded foods.

Jo and I reach two garbage containers that have their lids open, which is often a sign that someone has already visited them. Nonetheless we go up to the bins to make sure. Jo props up his bike on a tree next to the containers. The bike has a flat tire, but Jo insisted bringing it along, as the trailer he attached to it would definitely be needed to bring home the huge amounts of food that we would find. Thus far, it has a small bag of bread and sandwiches that Jo picked up from some street corner without me noticing and a few loose tomatoes, mushrooms and other vegetables that we found from the first bins we raided. They roll around the trailer like forgotten dices. Someone else had already visited those bins, too, so we did not find as much as Jo had boasted beforehand. All the best bits had been taken out and the remaining food had been carelessly mixed together, mushy vegetables with meat bits and napkins. Ugh. "Uhm, someone has already been here," I cautiously mention. Jo shrugs his shoulders "No, don't worry" and digs in. I do as told and manage to find a few tomatoes that do not slump through my fingers. I put them in the trailer and wipe my palms against the lid of the bin. We then walk towards the heart of the old town to reach another shop that could be recycled.



Illustrative flow-diagram (by A.Lotman 24.01.13)

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