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Capitalism and Its Discontents: Back-to-the-Lander and Freegan Foodways in Rural Oregon

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During an assessment of food needs and habits in rural Western Oregon, back-to-the-landers and freegans emerged as two groups that resist the global industrial food system by tapping into pre-capitalist subsistence patterns. Subsistence agriculture provides the inspiration for back-to-the-landers while freegans are akin to modern day foragers, living off the waste of others and on what they can gather in the wild. In this article, I describe the foodways of these two groups and suggest ways in which they might help articulate a post-capitalist food economy, using the work of J. K. Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective.¹

The economic geographers who write under the appended surname Gibson-Graham argue that when people talk about “the economy,” capitalism has trained us to only see the tip of the iceberg. Gibson-Graham urge people to not simply accept the hegemony of capitalocentrism, but to create a more inclusive discourse that recognizes the full complement of human economic activity (30–50% of which is accounted for by unpaid, household labor [2006: 57]). Applied to the food system, farmers are encouraged to grow for export, and economic statistics focus on crops sold. If people raise food to be eaten or traded, or if food is simply gathered, it doesn’t warrant a place in the statistics. Neither does the time spent procuring, processing, and serving food in our homes. All of this food-related activity remains below the tip of the iceberg and yet it is what sustains us.

An increasing number of people are rebelling against the global industrial food system by expanding the non-capitalist aspects of our food system that are already present. Harvey argued that, at the turn of this century,

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opposition to capitalism and globalization was almost as widespread as global capitalism itself (2000). Dissatisfaction with the industrialized foodscape has become mainstream, as journalists and scholars with a gift for popular writing like Michael Pollan, Marion Nestle, Gary Nabhan, Carlo Petrini, Barbara Kingsolver, Eric Schlosser, and Bill McKibben have laid out the dystopic elements of industrial farming and food processing and have written in defense of local foodsheds and healthier eating habits. Food has become the example of what is wrong with our environment and what is wrong with our economy. This is especially apparent in rural areas that used to produce more of the food they consume locally. Local and organic agrifood movements have come into their own and stories about farmers' markets and other forms of community-supported agriculture can be found in media venues around the world leaving the market racing to adjust.²

Alternative agrifood movements, such as back-to-the-landers and free-gans, reacted against the global industrial food system before such complaints floated into the mainstream and they embellished non-capitalist foodways that had fallen out of use. They resist the harm that is done to the earth and human health in the process of producing commodity food and work against the production of waste by buying bulk rather than packaged food, growing and gathering their own food, and rescuing items from the dumpster. Equally important, they resist the commodification of time, choosing to spend a good share of their time in unremunerated activities pertaining to food. However, they also recognize their inability to totally disconnect from the capitalist market and often the realities of feeding themselves and their families force them to compromise their ideals. This should not be seen as a failure, but as the evidence of multiple economic forms existing within capitalism.

Melucci defines the proliferation of social movements in contemporary society as group resistance to capitalist power. He notes that these types of identity movements are increasing as individuals lack the cultural bases for their self-identification (1996: 93). Melucci does not talk about the role of food in particular in these movements, but as Mintz and Du Bois state, "Like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart" (2002: 109). Foodways definitely separate back-to-the-landers and free-gans from the rural communities in which they are found.

In this article I describe the foodways of back-to-the-landers and free-gans whom I met in rural Western Oregon. These rather extreme alternative agrifood movements elucidate many of the issues that have become central to more mainstream local food movements. Drawing on subsistence strategies that were dominant in pre-capitalist times, their foodways can help us envision post-capitalist food systems.

METHODOLOGY

The initial research for this article emerged out of a larger qualitative project on food insecurity in rural western Oregon, which is described in more detail in Gross and Rosenberger (2005; forthcoming). During the spring of 2004, I interviewed 39 low-income residents from around the Coast Range town of Alsea where, in a population of 1100, 36 households were on food stamps. I did not set out to focus on back-to-the-landers and freegans, but these two groups stood out from the larger sample in their openly anti-capitalist stance and non-mainstream food habits. They tended to prefer foods that were unprocessed by large corporations. They were not obese and did not have diabetes, both of which were common in our larger sample. They identified with living “alternative lifestyles” in rural areas. Most of the back-to-the-landers moved out to the Coast Range in the 1970s when they were in their twenties, making them in their fifties at the time of the interview. The second group, who identified mostly as freegans though some were wary of all labels, were all in their twenties.³ I met them at my colleague Margaret Mathewson’s Ancient Arts Center where they were staying for free in exchange for doing some farm work. During the initial fieldwork phase, I recorded and transcribed lengthy interviews with two male and two female freegans who considered themselves a household, and three female back-to-the-landers in separate households. Subsequently, as an active member in the local food movement, I’ve had more informal conversations with four other freegans and several back-to-the-landers, both male and female. I also use published descriptions of back-to-the-lander foodways in order to compare the foodways of these two groups when they were at a similar stage in their lives.

PLACE

Detachment from place characterizes the global industrial food system, which is ready to do battle over labels of origin. For people who produce or forage for their own food, the particular place where their food comes from holds a lot of meaning. On the other hand, rural areas the world over have suffered from industrial food policies that reward agribusinesses for economies of scale and have caused massive emigration off the land to the cities. According to United Nations estimates, in 2007 the world became more urban than rural for the first time in history. Food has traditionally linked rural and urban populations, but today, despite the growth of farmers markets, Americans who live in rural areas are dependent on grocery stores in the cities. In fact, much of “farm country” North America can be described as a “food desert” not unlike poor sections of big cities where grocery stores cannot be found (Morton and Blanchard 2007). Ken Meter and Jon Rosales (2001)

explain how, in the richest farmland in the world in the American Midwest, people pay more to import food than they receive from growing and exporting it. And fewer people are involved in growing it. Most food secure rural residents own multiple freezers where they can store months of groceries bought during mega shopping trips to big box stores in the cities.⁴

The foodshed of western Oregon is bountiful. The Coast Range, an area of rain-drenched coniferous forests covering low mountains, is home to fish, elk, deer, mushrooms, and berries, all of which help feed the hills' human inhabitants. It is not difficult to imagine how the Alsea Indians sustained themselves on this land (Zenk 1990). The first white settlers arrived in Alsea in the 1850s and, besides hunting, fishing, and gathering, they made Alsea a thriving farming community. Polk's Classified Business Directory of 1913 reported that farming and dairying were the principal businesses of the valley. Apples, oats, and wheat were shipped out to Waldport on the coast. The wealth of the community was attested to by the founding of the Alsea state bank in the early 1920s.

Alsea, like rural towns all over the world, is a shadow of its former self.⁵ After World War II many locals shifted away from farming and into logging where the money was better. When restrictions on logging began in the 1980s, mills closed and Alsea shrunk. In 2004, the town had one general store that carried basic groceries and one restaurant, but the other businesses had shut down. The owner of the general store drives into Corvallis to pick up the merchandise he sells in his store since the town has dropped off all distribution routes. Alsea residents consider themselves lucky that they have not lost their school like all the surrounding rural communities have, and they are pleased to have a rural health clinic and a new library that opened in 2006.

Alsea residents consist of variety of people: descendents of early homesteaders, recent migrants from cities who telecommute, retirees, university professors, welfare recipients attracted by cheaper rents, government workers, and others attracted by the rural beauty of the area. The town lies about 25 miles from the county seat of Corvallis, but the route seems longer due to the winding road over Mary's Peak. There are times during the winter when Alsea is cut off from Corvallis and Philomath (which is closer, but smaller than Corvallis) due to mud slides or steep icy roads. A spirit of independence is shared by many of the residents, but they often do not always see eye to eye on issues. In this mix, we find back-to-the-landers and freegans. Jacob defined back-to-the-landers as people "who are interested in self-reliant living on their own land." He developed a typology of seven different types and of these; the ones who I talked with fall into the "purist" category or those who reduced their participation in the monetized economy while subsisting from the fruits of their own property and bartering with neighbors (1997: 28, 53). Some back-to-the-landers have lived around Alsea for over 30 years, but still might be considered newcomers by members of the old homestead

families. They live on several acres of land and have large gardens. Freegans are not permanent residents and are not integrated into the community. Most Alsea residents do not even know that they are there. There are no dumpsters worth diving into in Alsea so their foraging range extends to cities, but they exploit what food the woods has to offer and butcher animals that are killed by passing vehicles.

TIME AND SLOW FOOD

One of the biggest social transformations brought in by capitalism concerns how we view time. The clock, not the steam engine, was the key machine of the industrial era (Thackara 2005). In other patterns of subsistence, biological time dominates since it is linked to the growth cycles of plants and animals. Looking through colonial documents, you can often find references to collisions between capitalist and biological time. For example, directors of Indian boarding schools in 19th century Oregon constantly complained how their students disappeared when it was time to hunt, dig roots, pick berries, or when the salmon were running (Gross 2007: 28).

The role of countercultural movements is to call into question behaviors that are taken for granted by mainstream society. Both freegans and back-to-the-landers rebel against selling their time to labor in the capitalist system. They prefer working for food instead of working to pay for food. They reject a lifestyle that requires spending the bulk of their time working for money in order to buy material goods. Many have read renditions of anthropological research in rural societies that lie outside of mainstream capitalism, societies that practice foraging and subsistence agriculture. Timing is far more important than generic clock time when hunting, gathering, or growing food. During certain periods of the year provisioning activities swallow up every waking hour and at other times of the year people, like the land, lie fallow. Marshall Sahlins (1966) described foragers as the original affluent society since they were able to cover all their needs with about 20 hours a week of work and could devote the rest of the time to leisure. Of course, even that division between leisure and work doesn't make sense to foragers. It's all life to them. John Zerzan, the Oregon anarcho-primitivist with devotees among the freegans, describes the life of hunter-gatherers as the longest and most successful human adaptation to nature which was accompanied by gender equality, peacefulness, an egalitarian ethic of sharing, a lack of disease, and lots of leisure time (Zerzan 2002).

Post-Modern society is characterized by a speeding up of time. We constantly look for ways in which we can "save time" and new products are marketed on that basis. Growing food, finding food, preparing food, eating food; all these activities take time. That is why the appeal of fast food is overdetermined in advanced capitalism. Workers can quickly consume

necessary calories, so that they can get back to work or spend more time doing other things. Employers benefit from the economies of scale and government subsidies that make fast food cheap, so that wages can remain low.

Fast food was anathema to both the back-to-the-landers and the free-gans with whom I spoke. When I first arrived at the Ancient Arts Center to interview some free-gans, four of them were making fire with a fire drill on a bed of thistle down. Each one took their turn rotating the drill between their hands, then seamlessly passing it to the next person until one spark finally ignited. They painstakingly coaxed it into a small flame using their breath. Then gradually they transferred the flame to larger tinder until an adequate cooking fire emerged. Rather than the contemporary focus on individuals working on multiple tasks simultaneously, this required the intense concentration and coordination of multiple individuals in order to perform a single task, the creation of fire, the means by which raw food is transformed into cooked food. To make acorn mush, they first gathered the nuts under oak trees, shelled them and ground them into flour. Then water was run continuously over the flour for quite awhile to leech out the bitter tannic acid. The leached acorn flour was placed in a tightly woven and pitch-sealed basket filled with water. To cook it, they transferred a series of round fire-heated rocks into the basket. When one rock cooled, they would remove it and add a new hot one to the liquid. The water boiled and cooked the acorn flour into a thin porridge. This was really slow food and required group effort.

Even if back-to-the-landers didn't reach all the way back to a pre-agricultural era, they still searched for an alternative experience of time, one that was not divided up into equal units that fragment life's experiences. Belasco writes about how the counterculture of the late 1960s rebelled against the speed of the processed food business, preferring to spend hours baking bread and simmering stews over wood burning stoves (2007: 50–53). Jacob, in his study of back-to-the-landers, states that the central dilemma of simple living in the country is time versus money:

In order to develop a self-reliant farmstead, a family or couple needs time to build fences, weed the garden, milk the goats, and cut and stack wood. But at the same time, back-to-the-landers must earn some kind of income to buy, if nothing else, garden seeds, a nanny goat, or the cast-iron stove that burns the wood to keep them warm through the winter. To the extent they sell their labor in the local economies, they lose valuable time to improve their property. (Jacob 1997: 47)

Unless someone is very wealthy to begin with or has a pension of some sort, land ownership generally means paying off a monthly mortgage. Even for people who want to disengage from the capitalist system, making money does take time. Most back-to-the-landers I have met envisioned spending

the majority of their time on the homestead, but ended up spending it in waged labor. My friend Alison Clement wrote about this tension in her essay “On being wrong” in which she describes her family going back to the land in the Coast Range over the hill from Alsea:

We each drove an hour to work and an hour home, every day. Evening and weekends, we split firewood, worked on the water system, fixed the truck, repaired leaks, drove the laundry to town, did endless chores. There was no time to visit friends, take walks in the forest, read to the kids, or go to the beach. We never quit working, but life only got harder (Clement 1997).

Several of my back-to-the-land informants talked about the amount of time that they devoted to growing and processing food and how these activities had to be drastically curtailed once they joined the capitalist labor force. One back-to-the-lander talked about the farming and pig raising that she used to do before starting her own drywall business. Now, she explained that she makes her lunch while eating breakfast and is out of the door by 6 or 6:30. Then, she said, “I get home at night too tired to deal with anything.” The freegans who are at an earlier stage of their lives have not succumbed to steady jobs. They agreed that if they had jobs or children, they would not have time to go dumpstering or to wait in line for a food box, let alone make fire and acorn mush.

BACK-TO-THE-LAND: “EVERY VEGETABLE WE GROW IS A BLOW AGAINST GLOBAL CAPITALISM”

In the late 1960s, but especially in the '70s, thousands of young Americans reversed the urbanization trend and migrated from the city to the country (Jacob 2003). They set out to construct a different kind of life from their parents, based on subsistence farming and home food processing. They were already part of the countercuisine movement. Belasco quotes the Underground Gourmet depiction of the movement as a “revolt against a plastic, money-centered, soulless culture and all its trappings” (Belasco [1989]2007: 41). Dubisch points out the religious aspects of the movement with alimentation divided into “health foods” and “junk foods” ([1981] 2000). She also mentions how growing your own organic garden and grinding your own flour were seen as expressions of independence and self-reliance, which were characteristic of “an earlier ‘golden age’ when people lived natural lives” (2000: 217).⁶ Belasco dates the entrance of food as a central component of the hippie movement to 1966 when “the Diggers” unloaded a scavenged feast in Haight Ashbury (2007: 17). By March 1967, they were gleaned apples, planting vegetables, and beginning a network of rural

communes and urban co-ops (Belasco 2007: 19). The neo-Diggers disbanded, but by 1969 organic gardening was in and processed foods out (Belasco 2007: 25–27).

Since most back-to-the-landers escaped from suburban or city life, they needed manuals to learn how to be self-sufficient in the country. Starting perhaps with *The Whole Earth Catalog* at the end of the '60s, multiple books and magazines appeared with “Earth” in the title. The 1970s gave us both *Mother Earth News* and *Living on the Earth*, as well as the *Foxfire* books. Alicia Bay Laurel who began writing *Living on the Earth* when she was nineteen years old compared the back-to-the-land movement to other types of subsistence patterns in a recent entry on her webpage:

We wanted intimacy—not a neighborhood where you didn't know anyone on the block, or you competed, kept up with the Joneses. A hunter-gatherer or early agricultural community meant that people lived, worked and sought deeper contact with the holy spirit as a group, and they all knew one another, from cradle to grave. I used to call my hippie friendships ‘a horizontal extended family,’ as opposed to the ancient tribal extended family, which was multi-generational, and therefore, vertical. . . . (Laurel 2009)

This sentiment was expressed by my informant Henry who said that alternative types stuck together. Just recently he needed a couple hundred dollars to help purchase some new farm equipment and an alternative group in town (who took over a fraternal organization) provided him the necessary cash. When describing the back-to-the-landers in the Willamette Valley, Henry said,

[A] number of us felt the need to have a kind of extended family because we were no longer with extended families. In fact our families had pretty much blackballed us and rejected us. So, we built our own world, basically, of like-minded people and supported each other, still do.

Robert Houriet visited a couple of Oregon communes in 1971 and documented their lifestyle in his book, *Getting Back Together*. I rely on him to describe back-to-the-lander foodways when they were in their twenties, like the freegans today. I appreciate the level of detail he provides about foodways at High Ridge Farm in southwestern Oregon. Eleven adults and six children lived there and they had a two-acre garden, a greenhouse, and cold frames where they grew lettuce, spinach, Brussels sprouts, and kohlrabi through the winter. For breakfast they ate oatmeal with honey, raisins, brewer's yeast, and brown sugar. At other meals there were huge vegetable stews of potatoes, carrots, onions, turnips, and beets, and exotic salads, all out of their garden. Houriet claimed that the food mill seemed to be perpetually grinding. Five pounds of whole wheat flour took a half

hour (1971: 37). They ate meat once or twice a week, usually commodities hash or a curry made from turkeys donated at Thanksgiving by the Welfare Department (1971: 38). Commune members, besides tending their own garden, made money picking fruit during the summer and the farmer often gave them extra food. The women spent most of September and October canning.⁷ Houriet reports that by January half the stores had been used. They still had four dozen two-quart jars of tomatoes; a dozen quart jars each of peaches, apples, strawberries, cherries, blackberries, plums, squash, and onions; two dozen assorted jars of pickles; several bottles of mushroom catsup; a huge bag of dried mushrooms; bottles of home-brewed root beer and beer; a whole shelf of jams and blackberry syrup; and a bin of savory, marjoram, parsley, basil, spearmint, and sage. Two freezers were still nearly full of plastic bags of squash, corn, cherry tomatoes, beans, and other vegetables (1971: 39).

Oregon became a popular destination for rural communes and hippie farmers looking to develop traditional skills.⁸ It was close to California and land was cheap. These people identified with the environmental movement and therefore did not always see eye to eye with the locals. One of my informants Catherine spent a good part of her time fighting with logging companies over their abundant use of defoliants. She documented how it was getting into the food system and poisoning people. Here is how she described her move to the Coast Range in 1974:

We originally started out in Berkeley, but Berkeley got too insane and Steve really wanted to grow things anyway. I mean, every inch of our whole yard had stuff growing in it. So, we first moved up the coast, but it was windy and we couldn't grow enough there. Then, we moved inland, but after a couple years all these rock stars and people like that started buying up all the land around us. The next thing you know they are bringing in electricity, putting in roads. I mean we were like a little island, you know. It was horrible. So that is when we decided to sell it and move up here, and, so far, no rock stars have moved in . . . We showed up with our chicken, donkey, pony, and a couple of goats. I even dug up my trees and brought them with us . . . I made our own cheese, I made our own butter, but I mean, it was a lot of work. I didn't do anything else basically. With four kids we lived on \$500 a month . . . After the divorce, I went on welfare for a couple months. Someone arranged for us to get a Christmas box, but basically it wasn't food that we really wanted anyway. You know, a canned ham that is probably 90% preservatives, some canned beans. Basically, we just redistributed it.

At the beginning, Catherine and her husband grew enough food to feed themselves and sell to others. The area was more populated then and people came by the house to buy food. Catherine got a reputation as a baker and the mill workers and truckers used to stop by to purchase baked goods from

her. When the marriage dissolved and Steve sold the Caterpillar, Catherine had to reduce the amount of food she grew and find paid work. Traveling 90 miles round trip to get to work five days a week does not leave much time for food production, but she retains a distrust of industrially processed foods and keeps a small garden for herself. The apple trees produce excess on their own so, in the fall, she calls the gleaners to come and get them. Catherine said that it would be a lot harder to do what she did today. Land is a lot more expensive now and you can't pick up equipment like cream separators at garage sales like you used to be able to.

Social networks are important to all humans, and building social networks usually involves the sharing of food. When we asked low-income rural residents to describe a favorite meal, people from older settled families described large family gatherings (often Thanksgiving). At these dinners with extended family members, family recipes passed down from the last generation are likely to appear. Less-connected people in our sample often described meals in restaurants, focusing on the food, rather than the company. In contrast, both the freegans and the back-to-the-landers described either potlucks or communal cooking with groups of friends. Rather than a focus on traditional recipes, there was a focus on healthy, organic food. For the freegans it was food that they had gathered and shared with people whose paths they had crossed. The back-to-the-landers, on the other hand, had created a stable community over the years. One back-to-the-lander commented:

We've all been friends for years and years and we like to get together every once in awhile and have everything in the meal stuff that we've either raised or made. It's great company and fun to do it and put it together.

While the back-to-the-landers did not share the same food habits or view of the environment as the earlier settlers, they did share an interest in independence and self-sufficiency. Because of this, many of them built a reputation over time. The first back-to-the-landers I met in Alsea were community leaders who we interviewed during the first stage of the research. When asked about poverty and food insecurity in the area, they spoke of their own poverty when they were young and contrasted their healthy diets with the unhealthy choices being made by poor people today. In the following passage you can see how Marla, a back-to-the-lander who eventually joined the work force, is torn between her deep empathy with having no money, and her rejection of what she considers bad diet choices of the poor people she knows.

One of the main problems I see is that they get junk food from some of the stores in town and it's ghastly stuff that you really would not want to eat. And they're eating it because that's all they have. And so, some of the

people have problems with weight. They're sick and I think part of it's because of the terrible food that they eat. And they don't have any choice, they're unemployed. Some of these people have had accidents and they can't work, or they're a single mom with some problems. The families who are unemployed, they do seem to really have a great struggle in getting decent food. Why some of these people don't garden more than they do, I don't know.

The increasing price of gas affects rural residents far more than urban and suburban ones. People in Alsea commonly drove 25 to 40 miles to go to a grocery store. Marla continues the conversation, bringing up transportation problems of poor people, but then doubles back to stressing self-sufficiency as the route to a healthier diet.

When I first moved out here I was in that same situation. I was extremely poor, had little kids, lived way out, 16 miles from Alsea, and sometimes didn't have enough money to drive to Corvallis, where I could buy good food. And so I understand where they're coming from . . . Yeah, it's first hand experience of robbing the kids' piggy banks to buy gas to go to town and then once you're in town, you don't have money to buy good food. I think people aren't taught how to be self-sufficient, in terms of if you can't buy it, grow it.

I then asked her what some of her strategies were when she didn't have much money. She answered,

First thing we did was plant a garden. We actually got food stamps one time. My husband was working intermittently and we just lived very, very frugally. And that was good because we were eating a good diet and just mainly eating vegetables . . . I think our family was lucky because we were willing to not have a lot of stuff and we were willing to, to stay home and tend the garden and eat it. It was a pretty healthy life style really, in terms of actual health. We didn't have electricity and we didn't have running water, so we hauled the water. I mean it's kind of like Little House on the Prairie relived. We thought we were in heaven. I would buy 100 pounds of wheat from a local farmer and I would grind it up by hand and make my own bread. But people don't live like that now. I mean this was 30 years ago. I was willing to do that. And grow my own corn and grind my own corn meal and so we ate really well.

Both Catherine and Marla moved away from agriculture into waged labor, though by keeping smaller gardens. Many hippie farmers in the greater area remained in agriculture and have plunged into the expanded market for organic produce. At a recent agricultural direct marketing conference held at Oregon State University, one audience member identified himself as a "hippie farmer" and part of the "back-to-the-land" movement before

launching into a question about where the agricultural market was heading. He knew he wasn't alone in the audience and other farmers, some still sporting long pony tails behind their thinning pates, smiled and nodded.

One of my informants, Kim, has continued the lifestyle for over thirty years, feeding her family and others primarily from her land. She lives in an old wooden house at the end of a long dirt lane. During a visit last October, we walked past the chicken coop and the barn where the goats are kept. The year's harvest was gathered on the porch: peppers, apples, and grapes. As we stepped inside the kitchen, we noticed a large pot of goat milk being heated to make the day's cheese. Utensils hung above the wood counter; plastic bags stuck on twigs were drying in the corner. Multiple braids of garlic interspersed with sprays of quinoa hung from the rafters. The pantry off the kitchen was filled with home canned jars of fruit, pickles, and fermenting Kombucha (tea). On the wall hangs a sign saying, "Live like you'll die tomorrow. Farm like you'll live forever."

Lifestyles change as people grow older and especially if they commit themselves to raising children. Most of the back-to-the-landers talked about being far more mobile when they were younger and without children. Some of them, like the freegans, went dumpster diving, though for furnishings rather than for food. (The back-to-the-landers I grew up around referred to the county dump as the general store.) Once they had land and began growing food, their travels were curtailed and they became more rooted in a specific place. Parallel to constructing a more independent food system, back-to-the-landers commonly chose to homeschool their children. Both of these activities were considered integral parts of a holistic life, firmly rooted in a particular place.

FREEGANS: "WE'LL EAT YOUR SCRAP, BUT WE WON'T BUY YOUR CRAP"

When they are gathering wild foods, freegans are eating locally, but traveling defines their lifestyle so they do not have the same attachment to place as the back-to-the-landers. These modern-day foragers know where the best dumpsters are located in cities as far apart as Miami, Minneapolis, and Eugene and even local dumpsters carry food from all over the world. The freegans we interviewed had lived in from 4 to 15 places over the past year, not including cross-country trips where they slept where they could. Groups change membership and meet up from time to time either by chance or around particular events. Destinations are often chosen on the basis of food. They told me about a freegan from Quebec whom they met at the Turtle Mountain vegan ice cream dumpster in Eugene. He had heard about the dumpster and wanted to go to a warmer place for the winter, so he hitched

rides to Oregon. He was trying to figure out how to get the ice cream while it was still frozen, and then would move to another dumpster destination in Seattle.

The freegan movement got started in the mid-1990s as an offshoot of the anti-globalization and environmental movements. They prefer to opt out of the economic system entirely, living “in the cracks of society” as they say, consuming only what society throws away, or what they can gather in other people’s gardens, along roads, or in the wild. Small-scale shoplifting of items that are hard to find in dumpsters (like dental floss) is perfectly acceptable, though they prefer to steal from corporations, rather than small businesses.

The freegans I first interviewed had no regular jobs and paid no rent or mortgage. They belonged to the primitivist fringe, closer to what Edwards and Mercer call “forest ferals” in Australia (2007: 284). All of them had been to WTO protests and several had been tree sitters. I met them through my friend and fellow anthropologist, Margaret Mathewson. They were trading labor for a place to stay and access to the classes she was giving on techniques for identifying and using wild foods and fibers at her Ancient Arts Center. Even while learning these ancient arts, however, they said that they had to go to the city every 2 or 3 weeks to dumpster dive for food and the Center lies over an hour from the nearest city. In their trips to the city there is a logical progression to getting food. Ted described to me the routine:

We get to Eugene maybe every two weeks or something. And when we go, we go to the dumpsters first. That gets us our produce and then anything else that we might find. Like if we find like a bunch of pasta, a bunch of eggs, bunch of dairy . . . Then we get grains that we’re low on from the store with food stamps, and other things that we like to have around, you know like teas and spices and things like that.

There is a code to dumpstering, though not everyone complies. You only take what you can use, leave some for others and leave the area clean. The food is usually past its prime, so it must be consumed quickly, and some more quickly than others. Tomatoes and avocados need to be eaten immediately, while potatoes can be held onto longer. Occasionally they come across a windfall of a certain product. That is a good time to have a large communal meal or to trade with someone who has a lot of something else.

Like the punk café in Seattle described by Clark, these freegans reject the commodification of food by refusing to pay for it and by using food that borders on rotten (2008: 412–413). In media interviews with freegans, non-dumpster divers always ask if they have ever gotten sick from eating food out of the dumpster. I asked that question too and got the same answer. No one had ever gotten sick from eating out of the dumpster. (One girl added that she had gotten sick from gorging herself on pastries more than once,

but admitted that it was her own fault for having a sugar addiction.) Still, they admitted that they had to be careful because some people pour stuff on the food, like bleach and rat poison. It's pretty obvious from the smell and they don't take it. If it has just been in contact with other rotten stuff, they wash it before eating it. They all said that they ate food from time to time that they didn't like (mayonnaise on a hotdog bun, for example) because they were hungry. This especially happened when they were traveling. Lila described a time when she was hitchhiking and got dropped off at a truck stop with only a Burger King and she had to make do with what was in their dumpster. "If you're really hungry, any food is delicious," Lila said, "if you're not really that hungry, things become gross that aren't really, you know."⁹

The freegan household I first interviewed estimated that they got 60% of the food they consumed out of dumpsters, insisting that dumpsters provide a great variety of healthy food. Top on their list are the dumpsters of organic food processors and health food stores.¹⁰ The goal is to eat a healthy varied diet, while not contributing to the production systems that treat food as commodities. Lila claimed that she increased the variety of food she ate when she began dumpster diving. She said that she would never have tasted the delicious tropical fruit, chirimoya, had she not found one in a dumpster. My informants preferred the dumpsters of health food stores because the quality of food was higher in their estimation and the people were nice to them, even sometimes making separate piles of edible food outside the dumpster.

"Table scoring" (eating unfinished meals at restaurants) is another way of getting food in big cities. Ted and Alvin explained to me how this works:

T: If you want a good adventure for the night, go to a large city like Chicago and find the food district, all the yummy cafés and such. Go into those places and start eating the food.

A: You gotta look really crusty when you go in.

T: Yeah, look just really dirty. And go in and start eating food, leftover food. After people get up, they pay their bill, you go over and eat their leftover food until the workers come and they kick you out. Then you go to the next one down the block, you start eating there and they kick you out. You go to the next. It's fun. You can spend the whole night doing that.

A: And you can sneak into hotels and eat people's leftover room service that's sitting outside their door, and then sneak into the pool.

While cities provided a cornucopia of free food, they also told me that it was easy to have an unhealthy diet when eating out of dumpsters because lots of food is always available and most of it is bread, doughnuts, and pastries. One freegan went so far as to stop eating wheat because it forced him to have a healthier variety of food in his diet. Another one voiced

his interest in learning primitive gathering skills after living near a pizza dumpster in Portland where complete, boxed pizzas were always available. The constant availability of food in city dumpsters was not considered in a positive light by these freegans. While they felt good about preventing this food from going to landfills, they acknowledged that their health could suffer from the overconsumption of baked goods. One young woman felt like she was caught in a dilemma since she really liked to bake, following old traditions, but when she saw how many baked goods end up in the dumpster, she felt guilty about baking something from scratch. Several of the freegans I talked with voiced the opinion that it was healthier for them to be hungry sometimes and they alluded to fasting traditions. They told me about studies showing that people who didn't always have access to food lived longer and were healthier. "Fasting increases the lifespan," they said.

The freegans I spoke with are transitioning from gathering food from industrialized society to gathering food from nature. Nutrition was important to them. One of them remembered a chart on her mother's refrigerator that had the nutritional value of different greens. "Lettuce was like nothing. Spinach and kale were higher and dandelions were three times as high." She remembered her great grandmother eating dandelion greens, which the intervening generations had rejected and felt like she was recapturing some of the ways of her great grandmother. Foraging for wild foods means following the seasons and traveling to food sources. Zane always goes to Minnesota for the wild rice harvest in September (or "Ricetember" as he says). In October ("October") he digs wapato roots. Then he moves on to the San Juan Islands and eats lots of shellfish and fish. In early spring he makes his way back to tap sugar maples. They claimed to feel better when they foraged in the wild. Some of the favorite foods they listed were hazelnuts, blackberries, burdock, chickweed, nettles, mushrooms, dandelion, lambs quarter, violets, and venison. One of them said she had heard that food thrown in the dumpster loses energy. When urban foragers shift to wild foraging, they often reserve dumpster diving for when they are on the road. Wild foraging also forces them to think more about preserving food since, unlike dumpsters, food will not always be available. Zane carried wild rice and maple syrup from Minnesota to Oregon to share with friends.

Like the back-to-the-landers, freegans extolled the virtues of sharing food, cooking and eating together. Cooking and preserving seem to be special interests among this group of primitivist foragers. Teeja talked about how working together makes the potential drudgery of preserving the harvest fun. Wilma offered us assorted vegetables that she had pickled. Cooking was shared by both men and women. Whoever wakes up earliest makes breakfast and then whoever gets hungry first cooks up a pot of something that everyone eats. Recent breakfasts had consisted of corn meal mush and couscous. They talked about the pleasure of getting food for nothing and sharing it with other people. Often with the dumpstering crowd, one person

might have one ingredient and someone else might have another and they'll either combine food to make a meal or trade food if they're going separate ways. They raved about a big communal meal that they had recently prepared of wild salmon and acorn mush. They didn't want to take a salmon that hadn't spawned yet since they are endangered, so they grabbed one that had already spawned. They recognized that the taste had changed, but it was still good, smoked over an open fire. Other group meals they reminisced about included one in Saginaw with roadkill kabobs and dumpster vegetables and one in Wyoming:

We dumpstered this ridiculous amount of produce and I made this vegan pizza, made the sauce myself. I cooked it down from tomatoes in the sauce and invited our friends over. So there were four little kids and all these people around, and we're all eating vegan pizza and vegan apple pie. And everything in it was dumpstered, every single ingredient except, I think, a couple spices.

Two of the female freegans had gone through phases of vegetarianism. One had been a strict vegan for three years before becoming a freegan. Now she only consumes animal products that are "post-consumer," a term they use to describe food that has been discarded. The group prefers to eat wild game and has some reservations about grocery store dumpstered meat. They insist that roadkill meat is a lot fresher and more reliable than meat you find in the grocery store that comes from factory farms and is often filled with antibiotics and growth hormones. Freegan blogs talk about eating roadkill as having more political advantages than other forms of anti-capitalist food gathering. Unlike dumpster diving, it is entirely free of capitalist trappings, they say.¹¹ (This is debatable, of course, since driving fast in cars has a lot to do with saving time in our capitalist world.) These freegans had picked up three raccoons in that past few months, but one was "too far gone." Interestingly, trophy hunters are also a source of wild meat. Marvin told me that his favorite dumpster was near a popular hunting place in Minnesota. People chop the heads off the animals they killed so that they can mount them on the wall. They leave entire carcasses in a dumpster. Since it's so cold, the meat freezes quickly and freegans can use it during most of the winter. Everyone felt a little nervous about eating meat out of the dumpster during the hot months of summer.

Freegans do enter the mainstream low-income food network with their occasional use of food stamps and the emergency food system. Of the two, they prefer emergency food boxes since less invasive paperwork is required, but there is usually someone in the extended household group with food stamps. They are used to buy grain, oil, and spices in natural food co-ops. Since so much food is available in dumpsters, they often sell their food stamps for money to buy non-food stamp eligible things. Emergency food

boxes require less invasion of privacy, and they seek out pantries where they can choose their own food and avoid commodity food:

You can choose not to take the government food and 30-year-old canned food and stuff like that. A lot of times they'll have organic stuff ... you can get just good food there, but you won't get as much food that way.

One freegan said that when she tells people at the food pantry that she is vegetarian, they give her "extra stuff because they think vegetarians are deprived of nutrients."

Freegans subsist on discarded food because they have made a choice not to participate in the capitalist system. They have a strong sense of self-reliance and independence which they share with back-to-the-landers and other rural Americans. But this does not include "waged labor." Paid work, in fact, was talked about as a kind of drug that sucked you in deeper and deeper, as can be seen in the following quote:

Families where both parents have jobs, they're gonna have to have cars to drive them there, they're gonna have to have a house to pay rent, they're gonna have to have clean clothes, they're gonna have to have all these things that cost money. And once you get into that cycle, paying rent and paying insurance on your car, you need money to keep those things going. So you're dependent on your job, and you're dependent on your car and your house ... and it's like you're constantly spending money and never have enough which ties into food. So then you have to put food in there somewhere. And you don't have time to go out and dumpster and wait on food boxes. (When you go there you don't just go and get food, you wait for an hour.) ... The point is they're probably worse off than us.¹²

Our interviews with other low-income rural residents who followed a more conventional lifestyle seemed to support this point of view. Dual parents working for minimum wage, usually in fast food restaurants, ate both less nutritious and less enjoyable meals than the freegans. Nutrition was important to the freegans, but they realized that sometimes they had to fill themselves up with non-nutritious food.

The freegans I encountered are not yet reproducing, but they acknowledged that their lifestyle would be difficult to continue if they had children. A friend of theirs with a 9-month-old baby had to depend on food stamps because she could not be out nights dumpstering. Even waiting an hour for an emergency food box is difficult with young children, they conceded. A couple of the freegans talked about acquiring land at some point in the future so that they could grow their own food. A slightly older freegan woman I met later had, indeed, shifted into subsistence farming on communal land with six other people. She dug a root cellar to preserve winter vegetables

and she cans and dries and also ferments mead from gleaned fruit. The only time she dumpster dives now is when she is traveling. She tans hides and makes buckskin clothing that she sells at primitive arts gatherings. She also works a couple days a week at an organic nursery to buy what she needs to farm.

CONCLUSION: RESISTING CAPITALIST FOODWAYS

Patricia Allen discusses the incompatibility between environmental sustainability and social justice on one hand (two issues that are central to alternative agrifood movements) and capitalist agriculture on the other. (2004: 128–131). Food in the capitalist system is just another commodity wherein exchange value is privileged over use value and maximum profit drives the system. Back-to-the-landers, however, raise food primarily for its use value, not its exchange value. Even when they exchange food for money, they tend to favor direct sales where economic ties are socialized, not made anonymous. Under capitalism, economies of scale bring more profit, but they also force overproduction and waste. Both the exchange and the use value of the product is terminated once it ends up in the dumpster. Freegans, however, extend the use value of discarded goods, snatching edibles before their journey to landfills. Alternatively, they eat foods gathered directly from nature, outside of commodity circuits. By providing for their own food needs, either by growing or foraging, they lower the demand for commercial food and therefore vote with their forks against the global capitalist agrifood system.

However, there is no escaping the webs of capitalism. Freegans and back-to-the-landers generally cannot sustain themselves without the overproduction of the industrialized agrifood system that ends up both in dumpsters and in the emergency food system. The back-to-the-landers have been more likely to justify this as “ripping off the system,” whereas freegans usually make more of an environmental argument. Nevertheless, their dependence on commodity foods does remind them that they are not as independent from the capitalist system as they would like to be. One of Robert Houriet’s back-to-the-lander informants told him in 1970:

Of course we’re not self-sufficient. Economic self-sufficiency is a myth. We just don’t want to be trapped by a system that makes you try to meet a standard of living that’s too high; makes you eat food that’s too rich; live in a house that’s overheated in the winter and air-conditioned in the summer (Houriet 1971: 38).

A generation later, freegans voice a similar opinion. Both groups demonstrate that diverse subsistence economies already exist within capitalist economic space.

Marx distinguished between the kind of labor in which humans feel productive and part of nature and wage labor in which work is not an end in itself, but rather a servant of the wage (Marx 1959 [1844]). People are alienated from their own labor as they perform repetitive tasks in order to bring capital to others (and to themselves). Alienated labor can be seen as one source of what Jameson referred to as “the waning of affect” that characterizes late capitalism (1991). In the realm of food, the waning of affect might translate as the consumption of calories to create human energy (fast food and nutritional supplements), rather than having a personal relationship with where your food comes from, how it tastes, and whom you share it with. Back-to-the-landers and freegans embrace labor when it means working hard to secure and process food. One young freegan told me that he turned to this lifestyle because he wanted to feel something. He was searching for authenticity in the same way that the Underground Gourmet from the 1960s quoted earlier rejected the “plastic, money-centered, soulless culture” (Belasco [1989]2007: 41). Back-to-the-landers and freegans seek out the intensity of feeling that comes when their access to food is unmediated by a series of middlemen and a capitalist system that substitutes simulacra for the “real thing.” When a back-to-the-lander cuts the head off a chicken she or he has raised and puts it in the oven, or when a freegan climbs a tree in the middle of the night and clubs a raccoon that he roasts over a fire, both are resisting the alienation from our food sources that the global capitalist food system encourages. In so doing, they draw on knowledge that was important in past times that has become arcane in the present; how to make acorn mush, for instance. They accomplish what Gibson-Graham suggest we all should do, “cultivate ourselves as activists and subjects of noncapitalist economies” (2006: xxvii).

According to Melucci, contemporary movements announce a change that is already present (1996: 1). We all already participate in foodways that are distinctly non-capitalist, whether it be feeding family and friends or gathering mushrooms in the National Forest. Local food movements are bringing this to a new degree. Today, we can see alternative foodways slipping into the mainstream, especially in the face of contemporary crises. We see a renaissance of backyard, rooftop, and community gardening, farmers’ markets, fair trade associations, recycling, and composting. We see a deepening concern with over-packaging, food miles, environmentally degrading agriculture, and nutritionally bereft foods. As the food crisis emerges, we see people reaching into past subsistence patterns to create new knowledge and foodways that are not dependent on global capital. This mirrors the way in which James Ferguson, in his ethnography of Zambia, drew attention to the ways in which older modes of economic and social organization never truly die out, but merely retreat into the background as relic forms that are overshadowed by more ‘modern’ modes of development. He shows how older ideas and practices resurge in times of economic and social crisis,

when the 'main lines' that are supposed to lead to the future only lead to disappointment (Ferguson 1999: 251).

When we think about a "foodshed" or a "local food economy," we are necessarily acknowledging landscapes, and use value over exchange value. The local food movement also calls for the resocialization of the ties between producers and consumers (now envisioned as co-producers).¹³ Capitalism has encouraged a disconnection from where our food comes from and where our waste goes, but pre-capitalist foodways never truly died out.¹⁴ As global food insecurity increases and waste production reaches frightening levels, ideas embodied in the lifestyles of back-to-the-landers and freegans provide pathways to a postcapitalist future.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Margaret Mathewson, Carole Counihan, and the anonymous reviewers of *Food and Foodways* for making this a better paper, and also the freegans and back-to-the-landers who shared their words and food with me. Oregon State University's Rural Studies Initiative, Center for the Humanities, and Department of Anthropology provided necessary support.

2. The evils of our industrialized food system have been portrayed in films such as "The Future of Food," "The Global Banquet," and "Our Daily Bread," just to mention a few. We can see the market adjusting in the advertising campaigns of global food industries. See, for example, Frito Lay's advertisement "We Grow the Best Snacks on Earth" depicting a small-scale potato farm where what looks like family members collect potatoes in baskets and place them in a burlap sack that is standing in the grass right next to the mounded rows of potato plants.

3. Freegans in NYC have gotten quite a bit of press over the past years, especially the group led by Adam Weissman. Interestingly, most of the publicity emphasized that these freegans led down regular jobs and had homes, but lived on food waste out of deep-seated ecological concerns (Bergot 2004; Weissman 2006). You can watch a video interview with him by Life and Style staff at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqHhQGI-5KY>.

4. This is the situation we found both in the rural Coast Range and in South Central Oregon where Nancy Rosenberger and I have been conducting ethnographic field schools centered on rural food systems. In both places there is still a lot of home-based provisioning of food, especially among families that have generational depth in the area. People without food-provisioning skills who moved to these rural areas because rents were cheap soon found out how difficult it was to put food on the table.

5. On the impoverishment of rural places, see Lyson and Falk (1993) and Sumner (2005). The Rural Families Speak project found that the rate of food insecurity among rural low-income families with children was five times greater than the national average (Olson 2006).

6. These ideas live on in the local food movement. At a recent Ten Rivers Food Web meeting focused on the revitalization of grain production in the Willamette Valley, one of the board members who has been farming organically for 30 years turned to one of his age mates and said, "We'll have to dig out the grinders we used to use in the 1970s."

7. I will not go into how the burden of food preparation fell on the shoulders of women in these so-called liberated communities.

8. Oregon has a history of communes dating back to the Aurora Colony of 1863, which prospered for two decades by marketing apples, pears, and pear butter, along with lumber and fine crafts. The most infamous commune of recent times in Oregon is Rajneeshpuram, where 5000–6000 people developed a nearly self-sufficient (discounting initial purchases of big farm equipment and inputs) spiritual community. It came to an end after one of the leaders infected a local salad bar in the Dalles with salmonella in 1984 (Kopp 2004).

9. Black found similar reactions in her research among urban foragers in France and Italy and questioned why throwing away edible food is socially acceptable but eating garbage is not (2008: 147–148).

10. This contrasts with the dumpster divers described by Edwards and Mercer who preferred the dumpsters of large supermarket chains because they support industrial farming, often importing foods from overseas to the detriment of local farmers (2007: 287). Since freegans are only accessing post-consumer goods, it does not affect the way in which the food was produced.

11. <http://thetenoclocksolar.blogspot.com/2005/04/roadkill-is-yummy.html>

12. This sentiment was echoed in the website, Welcome to Planet Freegan: Beg, wheel & deal, barter, serve those in need, but NEVER, EVER work too much for that dirty dog that is money worship—especially credit—lest it make you its financial inmate, a monetary serf—a wage slave to dead end wage slavery jobs, and credit debt, interest, economic & emotional servitude. Worse yet, U might become a slave taskmaster and be forced to oppress others. <http://freegan.freeservers.com/>

13. See, for example, Kirschenmann (2008) and Petrini (2007).

14. The British organization Waste Resources and Action Programme estimates that we throw away about one-third of all the food we buy and at least half of this is food that could have been eaten. They claim that we could make carbon savings equivalent to taking one fifth of the cars off the road if we avoided throwing useful food in the bin (2007).

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