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Combating Food Waste: Dumpster Diving as a Form of Consumer Resistance

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Introduction: North America's Food Waste Issue

Food waste is a growing concern for Western societies, especially in North America. Canadians waste an estimated 40 percent of food produced for their market, an equivalent of \$27 billion annually (Parizeau, Massow, and Martin 2015, 207; Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013, 249). On a global scale, one-third of all food produced for human consumption is wasted every year (Gruber, Holweg, and Teller 2016, 3; Carolsfeld & Erikson 2013, 248). Food waste occurs at all stages of the supply chain: during extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal. What is of particular concern for the United States and Canada is food wastage in household and retail settings (Parizeau, Massow, and Martin 2015; Seifert 2009). Of all the food that ends up in landfills in Canada, it is estimated that half of the wasted produce occurred in homes (Parizeau, Massow, and Martin 2015, 207). While some people are conscious of their individual choices with respect to throwing food away, a growing number are losing a sense of connection to the food they eat. Our intrinsic value systems are changing due to capitalist modes of production and consumption, which are aimed at generating profit above all else (Seifert 2009). Despite this, Parizeau, Massow, and Martin (2015) note that people feel a strong sense of responsibility and guilt when household food is wasted, although most do not know what can be done to reduce the amount of food waste (212). Parizeau, Massow, and Martin (2015) highlight the importance of understanding food waste as a social justice issue, rather than an environmental or economic issue (216).

Dumpster Diving: Challenging Consumer Culture

Examining North America's food waste issue from a social and cultural perspective is crucial in unpacking the consumer culture taken for granted here in the West. The recent cultural practice of dumpster diving in urban areas such as Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Buffalo, New York, and Los Angeles has served as one form of resistance against our dominant consumer culture, which by design is incredibly wasteful (Vinegar, Parker, and McCourt 2016, 242; Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013, 245; Barnard 2011, 419; Fernandez, Brittain, and Bennett 2010; Seifert 2009). Dumpster diving, which can be defined as "foraging for goods disposed [of] by retailers, residents, and businesses", has gained popularity in recent decades (Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee 2014, 1877). While some resort to this method as a means to obtain food out of necessity, there are many other reasons beyond food insecurity that motivate individuals to engage in the practice of dumpster diving. Non-food related motivations include: political activism, thrift and self-reliance, and positive social experience (Vinegar, Parker, McCourt 2016, 242; Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013, 259). Some divers view their activity as a way of protesting against the modern industrialized food system, while others view it as a social activity and nothing more than a thrifty pastime (Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013, 256; Seifert 2009). However, it is imperative to mention that many divers participate out of discontent with our current food system, viewing it as a proactive effort to reduce waste while resisting mainstream consumerism (Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013, 260).

The social aspect of dumpster diving is significant for many individuals who participate, and the counterculture act aligns with the concept of "freeganism" (Barnard 2011, 420). Freegans are people who voluntarily adopt a minimalist lifestyle consisting of various alternative living strategies that go against mainstream culture (Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee 2014, 1877; Barnard 2011, 421; Seifert 2009). Most freegans have to conform somewhat to the capitalist nature of society in order to survive, although some have managed to rebel against the system entirely and

still live comfortably, often with the help of like-minded individuals (Vinegar, Parker, and McCourt 2016, 250; Barnard 2011). Still, most freegans face tensions arising from the conflict of their ideologies and the practical realities of daily life (Barnard 2011, 424). A growing number of divers identify themselves as freegans and often use clever tactics to draw attention to their cause. The New York City-based organization *freegan.info* is perhaps the most successful example of divers banding together to raise awareness of the issue of food waste (Barnard 2011, 420). The organization routinely offers public tours of diving activities and has been largely effective at garnering media attention to the point of influencing retail stores and bakeries to change their food wasting practices (Barnard 2011, 432). Freegans achieve this through what Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee (2014) call “reverse stigmatization”, a process in which divers paint the rest of us as “cultural dupes, indoctrinated and enslaved by capitalism” (1879). Freegans take an activity that is seen as violating social norms, one that is predominately viewed as filthy, uncivilized, and unhealthy, and then strategically “reverse the stigma of waste onto mainstream consumers” (Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee 2014, 1884). As such, freegans view the act of being wasteful as the real stigma (Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee 2014, 1882). Thus, the practice of dumpster diving sheds light on the perverse value systems rooted in our Western consumer society and calls on us to question these norms.

Examining the practice of dumpster diving through a socio-cultural lens reveals what is desperately needed in our consumer society: distributive justice. Production for profit needs to be shifted to production for need and human capital. The sense of solidarity and community among divers and their fight for a common cause reveals the need to embed democratic values in our current industrialized food system (Seifert 2009). We have much to learn from the individuals who participate in an activity most of us would not even dare to try. The increasing popularity and awareness of dumpster diving, over time, may contribute to a societal shift in consumer behaviour. According to Sussman and Gifford (2013), pro-environmental behaviours can influence others, as the pressure to conform ultimately increases the likelihood of environmentally friendly practices to become normalized within social groups (336). At the very least, dumpster divers encourage consumers to re-think their wasteful behaviours and to question the dominant taken-for-granted food system under a capitalist mode of production, which is currently causing widespread inequalities and environmental degradation.

As previously mentioned, dumpster divers often engage in the activity for social reasons. An additional point worth mentioning about the social aspect of dumpster diving is the fact that divers engage in various forms of “diving etiquette” (Fernandez, Brittain, and Bennett 2010, 1782). Divers often possess informal, unwritten codes of behaviour for how to properly conduct their diving activities (Vinegar, Parker, and McCourt 2016, 249; Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013, 255; Fernandez, Brittain, and Bennett 2010, 1782; Seifert 2009). These loosely held guidelines include keeping the area as clean as possible, taking only what will meet divers’ needs, assisting other divers, and sharing edibles deemed to be of high quality and/or quantity, most commonly referred to as “scores” (Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013, 247; Vinegar, Parker, McCourt 2016, 249; Fernandez, Brittain, and Bennet 2010, 1782; Seifert 2009). Closer examination of the high level of reciprocity and equitable distribution among divers reveals a stark contrast to the values entrenched in our current mainstream food system. A handful of corporations produce most of our food and it is neither evenly distributed nor accessible. Consumers have an abundance of choice when visiting the supermarket, yet remain slaves to a system that does not benefit them. Sadly, economically marginalized populations struggle to maintain a decent quality of life and lack the resources needed

to fight against a system that is designed to keep them impoverished at the benefit of a select few. Hence, the equitable values and sense of community among divers are at odds with the competitive, greed-induced values entrenched in our current consumer culture.

Food Waste Mitigation Strategies

How can we begin to solve the issue of food waste within a flawed capitalist system based on perpetual growth? More specifically, what strategies can be implemented to mitigate food waste, both at home and at the supermarket? As Fernandez, Brittain, and Bennet (2010) state, “Ironically, divers need the very market they are trying to resist” (1780). Consequently, individuals, store owners, managers, and policy-makers are forced to work within the globalized food system to elicit change. A dramatic overhaul of our current food system is desperately needed, but will likely not occur anytime soon. In the meantime, as demonstrated throughout this paper, we can learn from the values and ideologies dumpster divers possess to improve the food system, however flawed it may be from the onset. In addition to the social aspects discussed previously, there are numerous practical changes we can make to reduce our food waste. So, where do we start? Food wastage is an important issue at the household level; however, Gruber, Holweg, and Teller (2016) argue the significance of food waste in the retail setting (3).

Understanding North America’s food waste issue from a store manager’s perspective is vital in the effort to combat the problem and create positive change (Gruber, Holweg, and Teller 2016, 5). Gruber, Holweg, and Teller (2016) note that the general attitude towards food waste in the wholesale sector is regarded as a “natural side effect”, one deemed inevitable (4). Although some food waste is impossible to avoid, supermarkets can do better. Gruber, Holweg, and Teller (2016) outline a series of recommendations such as increasing store managers’ autonomy, creating education campaigns directed at consumers, and removing legislative barriers that prevent retailers’ ability to donate edible goods to charitable organizations (16). Another pertinent recommendation includes lessening legal restraints, such as removing labelling regulations that encourage wasteful practices (Gruber, Holweg, and Teller 2016, 19). Educating consumers on the meaning of “best before” and “use by” dates could certainly help, and would likely influence purchasing decisions in-store, as well as result in better food disposal decisions at home (Gruber, Holweg, and Teller 2016, 17; Seifert 2009). Sussman and Gifford (2013) call for government incentives in an effort to encourage stores and businesses to adopt composting practices (338). Despite these recommendations, Gruber, Holweg, and Teller (2016) note the challenges store managers currently face. Unfortunately, store managers and employees are limited in their capacity to solve the issue of food waste on their own. Responsibility ultimately lies in the hands of the executives in power who are far removed from the daily, in-store operations of their businesses (Gruber, Holweg, and Teller 2016, 15; Seifert 2009). The employees responsible for throwing out produce bear a moral burden and are often the ones who experience the harsh realities of food waste (Gruber, Holweg, and Teller 2016, 14). Pressured by corporate and supplier demands, managers often feel helpless and that their voices are not being heard. Thus, there is a large disconnect between in-store employees and those working at head offices. This disconnect further perpetuates the issue, as food waste is “regulated to a mere spreadsheet figure”, with no real connection to the impacts discarded food has on society (Gruber, Holweg, and Teller 2016, 20).

At the household level, responsibility rests in the hands of individuals. Parizeau, Massow, and Martin (2015) conclude that the most common type of household food waste is from food preparation (209). Interestingly, spoiled food was less common (Parizeau, Massow, and Martin

2015, 214). Therefore, Canadian households generally consume most of the food that is purchased. This fact reinforces the importance of tackling food waste in retail settings. Large supermarkets, as well as small independent grocers have a shared responsibility to minimize the amount of food that is thrown into trash bins. Still, we must not understate the significance of addressing this issue at an individual level. The role of food in our day-to-day lives is changing. Food used to be something that was highly valued. Now, under a globalized capitalist system, food is treated as a disposable commodity with no thought as to how it ends up on our plates (Seifert 2009). Producers need to be brought closer to consumers, both physically and ideologically. By creating a shorter food chain and establishing more localized, self-sustaining food systems, communities will be better able to alleviate food waste.

Local farmers' markets are viewed by some as an important first step at challenging our conventional food system. Feagan and Morris (2009) identify several reasons as to why people shop at farmers' markets, among these being food freshness, health benefits, social interaction, and support for local farmers, as well as consumers' sense of trust in purchasing directly from producers. Food box programs, eco-labelling, community gardens, restaurants serving local produce, and agricultural tourism will likely be strengthened with the increasing popularity of farmers' markets. The intrinsic values local consumers have – individuals who make an effort to seek out nearby, organic produce – align with the values held by many dumpster divers and freegans alike. Therefore, values such as environmental stewardship, reciprocity, and self-reliance will aid in the creation of a fairer and more equitable food system for all.

Moving Down a Sustainable Path

As this paper has shown, we are losing an intrinsic connection to the food we eat, while simultaneously harming the environment and each other by feeding our landfills. Food producers, retailers, and consumers should be increasingly conscientious of discarded food, especially “high-impact foods such as meat, dairy, eggs, [and] resource-intensive products such as imported or greenhouse-grown fruit and vegetables” (Veeramani, Dias, and Kirkpatrick 2017, 1403). Understanding our food waste issue through a socio-cultural perspective is of the utmost importance and will likely foster improved mitigation strategies for the well-being of future generations. The bottom-up cultural phenomenon of dumpster diving serves as a form of consumer resistance against the dominant industrial food system. By examining divers' motivations and the ideological viewpoints of freegans in Western society, scholars can better understand how power can be shifted from producers to consumers. Divers do not just encourage us to be mindful of the choices we make with respect to food waste; they seek to challenge pre-existing capitalist structures and conventional ways of thinking. Future research should further explore the complex and sometimes hostile relationships between dumpster divers, store managers, and the public at large. In order to solve North America's growing food waste issue, individuals must get involved at the local level and fight for social and environmental justice in their respective communities.

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