

A Primer on Freeganism

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Consumerism has slowly eroded the American ethos of self-sufficient pioneers and their rugged individualism. As such, frugality is quickly becoming a lost virtue. Should it really be any surprise that once the practical means of increasing and maintaining one's freedom has been culturally disregarded, tyranny wouldn't rear its ugly head once again?

A [portmanteau](#) of the words "free" and "vegan," freegans are essentially human maggots. They are the environmentalists who became fed up with reformism and decided instead to try to mitigate the harm to the earth by reducing their own personal waste. Much like the [black soldier flies](#) who inhabit the compost bins of most homesteaders, freegans subsist off of the waste of [corporate consumerism](#) while leaving behind a nagging itch as to whether there is, in fact, such a thing as [a free lunch](#).

Odd as it may sound, freeganism is primarily a methodology, not an ideology or even a reliable tool of [institutional analysis](#). Although much of their sentiments appear to be genuine, that does not therefore mean they are correct or even proper. What I am arguing here is that freegans pioneered techniques that have proven their utility over the years (in much the same way that [state citizens](#) pioneered techniques for successfully [navigating police interrogations](#)), yet the statistics they promulgate and the rhetoric they spew is worth *less* than the edible dumpstered food they rescue (pun intended).



Food wastage is the most ardently held grievance by the majority of freegans. According to the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the United States federal government's Department of Agriculture (USDA), [96 billion pounds of food was lost in 1995](#); a decade and a half later, ERS reported that [133 billion pounds of food was lost](#). Initially, this sounds pretty wasteful and recklessly irresponsible, doesn't it?

Keep in mind that this food wastage was limited to *edible* food wasted **only** at the retail and consumer level of the corporate supply chain. Granted, although the food wastage at the consumption end of the supply chain increased from 27% – 31% between 1995 – 2010, the total *edible* food supply increased from 356 billion pounds to 430 billion pounds over the exact same time period. In other words, despite a 5% increase in *edible* food wastage, there was a concomitant 20.7% increase in total food **production** between 1995 – 2010.

This is not to say that the freegans do not have a legitimate grievance here, for they do, very much so, but it is hard for me to not raise my eyebrow when the freegan literature cites secondary sources who claim that the ERS is low-balling the food wastage numbers, almost as if it were some part of an elaborate conspiracy that is difficult to prove. Proclamations of [domestic food wastage being 40%](#) (or higher) is not even slightly accurate, for the original source material only [showed food wastage being almost 40% in 2000](#) before dropping back down to the mid-30% range by 2005. Such a willful inflation of the statistics

(just like how [the War Resisters League did with military spending](#), all the while ignoring the [noticeable increases in welfare spending](#)) seems to me to be a way for the freegans to unnecessarily obfuscate the systemic problem of edible food wastage.

Simply put, according to the most conservative figures (that is, the ERS statistics), the fact of the matter is that **well over a quarter of all edible food in the United States is wasted by grocery stores, restaurants, and households**. The implications of this are nothing less than staggering, for if you remember that out of [~ 315 million Americans](#), [82% are urbanized](#); therefore, the supermajority of these wasted surplus foods are going to be dumped in urban and suburban areas (and in relatively good condition too, depending on climate). This suggests, more than anything, that not only is there plenty of edible food for the freegans to scavenge, but also that they are going to be congregating in metropolitan areas; hence, this is why freegans are also known as “[urban foragers](#).”

Philosophically speaking, freegans tend to have a frothing hatred of not just [Federal Reserve Notes](#) (FRNs), but [sound money](#) as well. [As Jeff Shantz succinctly put it](#):

“In place of the logic of the market and production for profit, freeganism offers the alternative of social relations organized around the vision of a gift economy. In this regard many freegans refer to the anthropological and sociological writings of Marcel Mauss who argued that societies without states and markets, far from engaging in undeveloped market activity through barter, actually desired social interaction based around gift exchanges rather than through utilitarian or instrumental exchanges.”

So-called [gift economies](#) are not direct barter, for they reflect an old anti-propertarian bigotry. This prejudice against private property believes that it can solve [the double coincidence of wants and the problem of indivisibility](#) by refusing to provide reciprocal value in trade. Answering the problem of statism, which does not respect private property, by saying that private property and voluntary trade should be abolished, is fallacious reasoning at best. Sadly, freegans appear to suffer from the [false cause fallacy](#) by loudly denouncing the multinational corporations, all the while turning a blind eye to the [bureaucratic administrative regulations](#) that are coercively enforced by the very same government who **created** those corporations in the first place!

Let me be perfectly clear regarding a significant nuance in the freegans’ rhetoric – I think that mutual aid, [particularly as expressed through cooperatives](#), is useful and vital for the evolution of human liberty, for this was the basis behind the [friendly societies](#), which were the agora’s solution to the market demand for a social safety net. Voluntarily funded and privately staffed, these mutual aid societies adequately served their function in getting distraught people back on their feet *without* engaging in [welfare statism](#) or [regulatory capture](#) (as the inevitable results of the [New Deal](#)). Yet, the assistance they provided to the destitute were not under the auspices of “getting something for nothing,” for those receiving such aid were held accountable whenever they abused their sponsor’s largesse.

The real value, though, that freegans have to offer are their [pragmatic techniques](#) for creatively minimizing their use of FRNs. Whether it be through [time banking](#), [guerilla gardening](#), [squatting](#), [vegetable oil powered automobiles](#), [regifting](#), or even [dumpster diving](#), freegans truly shine when they are practicing the fine art of getting by with little money. Such methods can be used in isolation, or in tandem with whatever combinations a freegan may desire; some freegans use *all* the aforementioned techniques in order to

enjoy a comprehensive lifestyle, which is independent of [the white market](#).

[Dumpster diving](#), in particular, is a real hoot. Also referred to as “skipping,” “garbage picking,” or even “bin raiding,” diving into dumpsters as a way of salvaging abandoned property is a very capitalistic thing to do. Divers have been able to scavenge edible food, wearable clothing, and even usable furniture. Of course, since not all dumpster divers are freegans, some divers choose to [refurbish their salvaged goods](#) and [sell them cheaply](#) on eBay or Craigslist ([Grifter once gave a lecture on dumpster diving for hackers at Defcon](#)).

At this juncture, you may be curious as to the legality of freegan practices. General speaking, guerrilla gardening and squatting are forms of [civil disobedience](#), dumpster diving is a grey area, and all the other techniques are *presumably* “legal.” What I mean by dumpster diving as a legal grey area is that depending on jurisdiction, diving may or may not be illegal; yet, even if it technically is not, the [police interrogations](#) that freegans have experienced demonstrate that the [American gendarme](#) will use whatever excuse they have to in order to get them to stop diving, whether it be an accusation of vandalism, trespassing, or even “disorderly conduct.” Despite the fact that the [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act of 1996](#) significantly lowered the criminal and civil liability for grocery stores and restaurants to donate food down to the standard of [gross negligence](#), Big Food still chooses to trash perfectly edible food, not realizing that [food dating labels have nothing to do with food safety](#). As [many freegans have remarked time and again](#), **the same standard of gauging the edibility of food in your refrigerator is what you would use to judge the edibility of food in a dumpster** (it is also because of this rule of thumb that dumpster diving is more beneficial in colder climes).

Unfortunately, dumpster diving *is* illegal in both Houston and Austin, if not in Texas generally. James Kelly, a homeless Navy veteran, was ticketed for “[disturbing the contents of a garbage can](#)” last year, and [he is facing a maximum fine of \\$500](#). The Code of the City of Austin criminalizes anyone who removes any “rubbish, refuse, or other discarded materials from any garbage or recycling container or receptacle” that is located on any property but his own, and said individual is to be fined anywhere between \$100 – \$2,000 **per offense**, pursuant to [§§15-6-1\(18\), 15-6-111, 15-6-116, & 15-6-132](#). Needless to say, this is all *mala prohibita* in action, and in that regard, those of us who care about human freedom must support the [rightful liberty](#) of all people to salvage abandoned property, regardless of whether the government approves of it.

[Media coverage of the freegans since 2005](#) has portrayed them alternately as dedicated environmentalists and as deranged lunatics. Originally, the corporate mainstream press treated them as curious pariahs, at least until [Jane Velez-Mitchell had a change of heart](#). Alternative media judged them a lot more fairly, [eventually siding with the freegans](#), not necessarily against consumerism, but more around the sheer food wastage. Of course, the sensationalism generated by opening up garbage bags stuffed with day old bread never got old, and neither did the concomitant prejudice of many people who turned their noses up at what they perceived to be the “ickyness” of freegans skipping the bins.

How useful is dumpster diving to the average Joe? Well, it allows a way for people to get off food stamps, and perhaps the welfare state as well, eventually. It can help substantially lower your grocery bills now, thus freeing up what you would have spent on food for some other purpose, such as your emergency food storage or ammunition cache. And, most significantly, it can be used as a way to supply a safe house, or even an underground railroad, should the need ever arise because of the American police state.

More importantly, how useful is the freegan ethos to **you**, though? As a fellow libertarian comrade of mine asked me, “Can I pick it up and use it to win my freedom back?” Unlike [state citizenship](#), freeganism can indeed be picked up and used immediately, and perhaps you’ve been doing it already without realizing it. For instance, if you’ve ever [recycled gray water for toilet flushing](#), hauled away a liquor store’s used cardboard boxes, [exchanged a book through a Little Free Library](#), or ate free samples at the local grocery store, then you’ve been practicing freeganism. Again, it is more along the lines of what [Gerald Celente](#) referred to as that “[Yankee frugality](#)” that lovers of liberty should hold dear, and I will leave you with the

following adage that sums it all up perfectly:

| *“Use it up, and wear it out. Make it do, or do without.”*