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Living on the margins: dumpster diving for food as a critical practice

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ABSTRACT

Dumpster diving for food implies using discarded edibles found in waste containers behind supermarkets, for example. People who voluntarily engage in this activity suggest that it is a form of hands-on social critique. In this article, we use interview materials to describe and conceptualize this practice. The main question we pose is: in what way is voluntary dumpster diving a 'critical practice'? Drawing on the pragmatic sociology of critique, we show how it is a question of an entangled practice in multiple ways: first, dumpster diving is at once a means of contestation and experimentation on the limits of the contemporary form of life and yet simply a way of getting food for free or having fun with friends; second, while being a thoroughly rational endeavour for its practitioners, the activity is simultaneously rife with affect; finally, although dumpster divers are fully aware that they are dependent on the capitalistic form of food supply, the practice allows them to challenge its institutional self-evidences and distance themselves from it.



KEYWORDS

Dumpster diving; critique; pragmatic sociology of critique; waste; consumption; reason; affect

Introduction

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (Foucault 1984a, 50)

In this much-cited passage, Michel Foucault addresses philosophical practice, which he believes should reflect on the contemporary form of life and thereby become a 'critical ontology of ourselves'. While drawing on Kant who links critique to the exploration of limits, unlike Kant, Foucault suggests that instead of affirming the limits that are imposed on us, philosophy should analyse them in order to open new possibilities for thinking and acting. In our view, Foucault's words capture something essential in the ethos of voluntary dumpster diving, the practice of using for living discards found in waste containers. Although, obviously, this activity lies far from the scholarly pursuits

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of reading and writing, the attitude inscribed in dumpster diving and the way of life attached to it are critical of 'what we are', especially in relation to the contemporary forms of retail and consumption characteristic of the global north. The practice is very much about recognizing the shared limits of property, purity, and hygiene and about turning these limits into objects of experimentation, with 'the possibility of going beyond' and living otherwise.

Through research conducted in Finland, we examine in this paper how dumpster diving appears to make it possible for people to live in the midst of an unecological form of life while carving out a critical space for themselves within it. In a sense, the practice provides an alternative to capitalism within capitalism. While rummaging through others' waste is usually considered as dirty and degrading, voluntary dumpster divers refuse this stigma and re-direct it onto the wastefulness of contemporary capitalism (Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee 2014). For them, the practice, interwoven in their daily life, is essentially about cultivating an ecologically sustainable and morally coherent lifestyle. We inquire into how voluntary dumpster diving gives people a sense of autonomy, a sense of not being confined within 'the limits that are imposed on us', as Foucault puts it. Yet, dumpster diving is not only about lifestyle preferences or assuming a critical attitude. It interests us above all as a *practical* form of criticism rather than as a form of judgment.

Social critique is usually recognized as an important topic to investigate in relation to conspicuous political activism. By contrast, the practice that we study is largely conducted in the dark, away from observing eyes, in the shadows of the public realm. Instead of being visible in the *agora*, dumpster divers live on the margins in both senses of the word: not only does their way of life differ from how most people live, but they also feed themselves off what other citizens have thrown away. For the practitioners themselves, it is clear that, although their activity is not public, what they do calls into question other people's manners of getting along and, more generally, some of the core features of contemporary capitalism. For them, voluntary dumpster diving embodies a criticism that targets overproduction, overconsumption, and the inability of people to take into consideration the ecological limits of our planet. Thus we ask, how does dumpster diving imply a critical experimentation on the contemporary way of life, and what does this activity consist of? And what should we make of this form of criticism, where deeds in the margins are more important than public discourses, proclamations, and debates? In other words, what does it mean to speak of dumpster diving as a *critical practice*?

Discussing these themes, the structure of the paper is as follows. After this introduction, we outline in greater detail what is at stake regarding the concept of 'critique' in relation to dumpster divers' practices. We then describe the empirical materials upon which we base our inquiry and how we use them. In the four sections that follow, we elaborate on the paper's empirical substance. We begin by explaining how dumpster divers encounter an abundance of foodstuffs in supermarkets' waste areas. After this, we discuss how our informants deem dumpster diving to be an intrinsically rational activity that also involves powerful affects, that is, states of body and mind related to feelings and emotions. The next two sections go more deeply into the realm of communication and politics by examining, first, the way in which and with whom dumpster divers speak about their activity and, second, the kinds of explicit terms with which they describe their practice as being critical and towards what. Before the conclusions, we

present a discussion section where the criticism evident in the informants' activities is juxtaposed with certain influential theoretical formulations on what working the margins of capitalism and critical practice can mean today.

Pragmatic sociology of critique: what is at stake in dumpster diving?

In his book on the concept and practice of 'critique', Luc Boltanski (2009) juxtaposes the term with what he calls 'institutions'. In his view, the core task of the latter is to stabilize reality for people: to establish and guarantee the conceptions of what is 'real' and what can be done. Critique, by contrast, is able to question these conceptions. It aims to show what is misunderstood, suppressed in, or completely left out of the reality stabilized by institutions. In particular, the task of critique is to orient people's attention to injustices and inequalities that institutions produce and maintain.

Starting from these premises, it is easy to see the retail food sector as an institution. As one of the basic infrastructures of our form of life, it induces people to understand, as a self-evident part of reality, that it is through supermarkets and local grocery stores that the distribution of foodstuffs takes place and that one has to use money to obtain essentials. Money for its part is to be acquired primarily from active participation in the labour market; if this is not possible, it will be procured through various kinds of social services – unless one can live on the profits made through financial investments, an option available only for a select few. Dumpster divers relativize all of these 'realisms', but their stance is not one of complete opposition; rather, they shake up and experiment with what is deemed self-evident. To begin with, while dumpster divers do get their food from the retail system like everyone else, they appropriate it from the backyards of the establishments, in the waste bins. They certainly do not use money for their acquisitions, yet they understand the financial benefits of the practice. Finally, as we will show below, one reason why people might dumpster dive is that it allows them to work less and increase the degree of autonomy in relation to the institution that depends fundamentally on salaried work.

The foundational texts of the pragmatic sociology of criticism emphasize that, in their daily lives, people can be deeply aware of problems in society (Boltanski 2008, 2009; Boltanski and Chiapello 1999; Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Thévenot 2006). According to Boltanski and Thévenot, instead of sociology simply having the task of illuminating the faults and weaknesses of a way of life, as if from afar, 'objectively', and outside of people's own views and understandings, it can and should study the practices of questioning and problematizing that take place in the everyday. Our study shares this starting point. However, our emphasis is neither on voiced criticism and displeasure nor on exit, the two options which Albert Hirschman (1970) famously offers to people who do not want to be loyal to a given system. Dumpster divers do something else: they are critical *through their practice*.

When we say that dumpster divers are critical through their practice, we mean not only that they are critical in terms of *praxis*, that is, in what they do instead of merely possessing a critical attitude and being critical in their thinking. We also suggest that criticality is folded into the very ways in which dumpster diving is carried out. With such an understanding of the concept, our approach can be linked with the literature that is especially popular in the research on sustainable consumption (e.g. Corsini et al. 2019; Evans, Welch, and Swaffield 2017; Welch and Warde 2015; Welch and Yates 2018). In

these texts, 'practice' is understood as a somewhat routinized and recurrent type of action that involves materials, skills, and meanings as its elements (Reckwitz 2002; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). We insist on acknowledging the constitutive role of matter in the practice, as dumpster diving puts in motion an assemblage of bins, waste, the retail institution, and urban streetscapes along with bodily competencies and proper gear, in addition to the particular orientation to the urban environment we call the 'scavenger gaze' (Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen 2020). Yet, we want to emphasize that there is more to the concept of practice than simply recurring routine, as it can encompass innovation and reflection, too, as its elements.

Innovation and reflection are at the core of the so-called French pragmatist tradition of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), who underline the role of justifications in daily life. These aspects are also foregrounded, albeit differently, in Michel de Certeau's writings on the tactics of everyday life and in Foucault's texts on 'the practice of oneself', for example (de Certeau 1984; Foucault 1984b). While for the first, 'practice' relates to inventiveness in difficult life situations, for the latter it has to do with systematic and rational work on oneself and one's conduct of life. Importantly, although it could be claimed that the asceticism described by Foucault does aim to achieve a degree of habituation and routine, nevertheless more central to his concept of practice is the constant alertness needed in the dynamic relations between oneself, others, and the world. It could be claimed that de Certeau similarly emphasizes the role of alertness in practices, although for him, the focus is not on one's relation to oneself, but on the potential for innovativeness needed for getting by in daily life. Thus, in addition to being about repetitive action in relation to the material world, for us practice is also about inventiveness and about relating oneself to the rules and norms that define the action as meaningful to practitioners as well as to outsiders, including the suspicion that it raises. On the whole, then, as a practice, dumpster diving exists as a conjunction of these various elements, and it is only through recurrent yet often innovative actions and doings that the interdependencies between the elements which constitute the practice are enacted and 'sustained over time' (cf. Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012, 7).

What distinguishes our study from the canon of the sociology of critical capacities is that, although the latter has raised the issue of how people can be critical in practice, scholars have focused largely on analysing *discursive practices*, whether they have to do with justifications or with grammars of criticism. The works of Boltanski, Thévenot, and their followers have often focused on situations where individuals or groups of people have started to voice publicly their displeasure about an issue and have politicized it. In other words, while in this school of thought the ability to be critical or to justify particular forms of action are seen as based on practical participation in the common world, social scientific analyses have, in the end, generally concerned discourse: What are the contents of the criticism? How are they voiced and through what channels, in order to achieve what?

In relation to the foundational texts of the pragmatic sociology of critique, voluntary dumpster diving offers a case that is different in an important way. For our informants, the activity does not entail a discursive practice of publicly problematizing social life. Instead, dumpster diving amounts to a *non-discursive critical practice*. As such, one might want to link it with the forms of activism that centre on physical interventions. For example, the public has been made aware of environmental problems not only

through marches or manifestations but also through semi-illegal actions such as obstructing forestry companies' work or the operation of factories – with the activists having chained themselves to trees or machinery – or freeing animals to hamper fur farming. However, even if such interventions in and of themselves are non-discursive, their main aim has typically been to make the broader public aware of the targeted problems. When most successful, they have become spectacular media events. As we detail in this paper, what makes voluntary dumpster diving different is that, for our informants, the aim of the practice is only very marginally to have a public effect; rather, the activity is part of their mundane daily lives. For them, dumpster diving is not primarily about social activism, although it is often part of a lifestyle that can include squatting and strong commitments to ecological awareness, if not full-fledged radicalism. But if a social movement is about gathering people together around an issue and giving it a public voice (Dewey 1927; Marres 2007), such aims are at best marginally significant in relation, if not completely irrelevant, to what our informants do. This is also a crucial difference between dumpster diving and the broader consumer movement. Obviously, the latter is based on a critical attitude towards the retail institution and is operationalized into concrete deeds; however, the consumer movement seeks to gain widespread visibility through various forms of public action and campaigns (e.g. Hawkins 2010; Hilton 2007), a concern that did not arise in our interviews with dumpster divers.

Obviously, we are not claiming that voluntary dumpster diving would be discordant with forms of broader social critique or public political activity. The analytical point is different and concerns something else. It has to do with the ability to recognize and articulate a practice that, first, is critical and explicitly challenges predominant norms without, however, targeting public visibility or aiming to achieve open politicization. Using Joost de Moor's (2017) classification of some of the basic dimensions of lifestyle politics, dumpster diving amounts to an inward rather than outward, and an indirect rather than direct critical practice. Second, it is inherently entangled with aims and benefits other than the critical ones. And third, it is about experimenting with the limits of a way of life.

In the existing literature on dumpster diving, the practice's critical capacity has been highlighted. An important early contribution, Jeff Ferrell's *Empire of Scrounge*, offers a close auto-ethnography of urban bounty hunting and examines 'the personal and political economy' involved in scavenging as a means of survival (2005, 4). Ferrell suggests that looking into the urban underground through dumpster diving gives us an 'opportunity to develop a critical, grounded understanding of contemporary consumption and its relation to collective wastefulness'; it allows us to frame the critique of consumer culture differently, 'not in terms of comparative political economy, but intimately, sensually, filthily, from the bottom up' (2006, 6). Research on the topic has proliferated since Ferrell's book. For example, studies have shown that voluntary dumpster divers are mostly middle class and well educated (Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013; Edwards and Mercer 2007; Vinegar, Parker, and McCourt 2016) and that they are not simply outside consumer society but play with notions of value at its margins (Brosius, Fernandez, and Cherrier 2012; Clark 2004; Fernandez, Brittain, and Bennett 2011; Giles 2014; Gross 2009; Guillard and Roux 2014; Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen 2020).

Our familiarity with these studies, however, did not prepare us for the relatively subdued tone regarding activism that characterizes our interviewees' accounts. This

makes for an especially interesting contrast with Alex V. Barnard's *Freegans: Diving into the Wealth of Food Wasted in the United States* (2016). Barnard's ethnography provides detailed descriptions of the social movement and the broader political activism linked with freeganism in the United States, particularly in New York City. For Barnard's informants, a highpoint of a dumpster diving tour was that the perfectly edible foodstuffs they found in the bins were laid out in public and accompanied by speeches, so that passers-by would become aware of the riches daily thrown away (Barnard 2016, 85–90; see also Barnard 2011). Such spectacular displays are completely absent from our interviewees' histories and experiences. For them, as becomes clear below, broader political activism is not at the core of the practice, although some of them can identify with it. In this respect, the dumpster divers whom we interviewed resemble such groups as vegans and vegetarians (Cherry 2006; Maurer 2002), voluntary simplifiers (Grigsby 2004), and slow fooders (Wexler, Oberlander, and Shankar 2017) in that they 'profess to change the world but focus more energy on cultivating a morally coherent, personally gratifying lifestyle and identity than issuing direct challenges to the state/social structure' (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012, 3). In contrast to social movements, the lifestyle-centred practices of these groups or 'lifestyle movements' are focused on diffuse and private, rather than organized and public, action, which is also interwoven into the everyday life of the adherents. Similarly, studying dumpster divers offers a way of bridging the gap between assumedly individualistic lifestyle and organized, collective social movement by exploring the intersections of private actions and social change (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012, 2, 5). In addition, the way our informants talk about dumpster diving allows us to focus on how the practice itself *is* critical while being experimental, instead of simply reflecting ideological and political stances and ultimate aims that can be abstractly formulated outside it.

Emphasizing the non-discursive and non-public side of criticism evident in our informants' accounts is not to say that their activity takes place in a discursive void. Rather, there exist handbooks and websites that discuss the politics and philosophy of dumpster diving (Ferrell 2005; Hoffman 1993); local Facebook forums in Finnish cities, for example, can be quite active in this respect. In addition, during the past decade, at least in Finland, the media have quite often published features describing voluntary dumpster diving, usually casting it as an exotic curiosity. In fact, this media exposure appears to have affected shopkeepers' practices and the public's awareness of the problem of foodspill. However, these discursive forums and effects are not at the core of the activity and not of primary importance to the people whom we have interviewed.

In asking what kind of critical activity dumpster diving is, we are thus also led to investigate what makes it *attractive* to those who do it regularly. Clearly, challenging the given understanding of the food retail institution, of capitalism in general, and the distribution system and forms of consumption it enhances, makes the practice meaningful for those who engage in it. Most probably, they would not undertake the activity at all if it were not in a critical relationship with the food practices that they observe. However, this critical attitude is only *part* of the activity. This point is important for understanding what social critique can be and what it can look like.

It would be a mistake to try to understand the critical dimension of voluntary dumpster diving as an activity abstracted from the other purposes it involves. We underline

that it can be attractive only through being an *entangled practice*. Indeed, in addition to being part of an ecologically sound form of life, the practice makes economic sense; one gets food for free. And it can be fun, too. (See also Fernandez, Brittain, and Bennett 2011, who analyse economic, ideological, and psychological motivations for dumpster diving.) Thus, in relation to the theme of this special issue, we discuss in this paper how it would be impossible to understand the critical side of voluntary dumpster diving without understanding how different forms of reasoning and different kinds of affects are not only constitutive of the practice, but also how they are fundamentally intertwined with one another.

Interviews with dumpster divers

The background of this article is ongoing fieldwork on the practices of dumpster diving. The data consist primarily of interviews, but newspaper articles and other media materials are also used. Thus far, we have discussed dumpster diving with 14 people who have actively engaged in it. In addition, we have conducted a single interview with a shopkeeper. The informants were recruited through various channels. Some were found through contacts in a Facebook group that focuses on dumpster diving and others through snowballing; new contacts were gained through those who had already been interviewed. In addition, after our talks, students and colleagues who know dumpster diving people or who practise it themselves put us in contact with potential informants. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. We met with these people in the Finnish cities of Helsinki, Tampere, and Turku between 2012 and 2017. However, some of the practices and experiences recounted by the interviewees took place either in other, smaller towns in Finland or elsewhere in Europe.

Who, then, have we interviewed? Although the focus of this article is on the practices of dumpster diving – rather than on the identities of the people who do it – some basic characterizations of our informants are appropriate. There were eight women and six men. The interviewees were between 23 and 43 years of age, but only 4 were older than 34. Importantly, our informants do not scavenge out of necessity. The great difference between voluntary dumpster divers and the outcasts suffering from humiliating poverty is especially underlined by the obvious fact that for the latter group the practice is not related to any kind of critical or political action. Our interviewees, in contrast, are full-time students, researchers, and young professionals or semi-professional radicals. They can also afford to buy their food but choose to do otherwise. Rather than a last resort, dumpster diving is their edge (Hoffman 1993).

Although dumpster diving can seem radical from the point of view of other consumers' daily lives, it is noteworthy that our informants are, on the whole, middle class, based on their appearance and lifestyles, a characterization that is found in other studies (Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013; Edwards and Mercer 2007; Vinegar, Parker, and McCourt 2016). They are relatively highly educated, holding university degrees or having completed some other form of tertiary education. While a couple of interviewees actively espouse anarchism and try to live as much outside of the money economy as possible, dumpster diving for the rest is just one practice among the many that make up the fabric of their daily lives. Thus, importantly, more than being part of an all-

encompassing ideology that could be called ‘freeganism’ or ‘anarchism’, dumpster diving for our informants is part of a varied lifestyle that is a kind of moral bricolage. For them, an ethically sound life consists of doing good through available means but also of being aware of the need to make some compromises with the affordances in their surroundings, as we show below.

We have analysed our materials by means of thematic coding, highlighting the core findings relevant for our present aims. Especially, we have looked for narratives that detail the practicalities of dumpster diving and the critical elements of the practice to gain a grounded understanding not only of the nature and mundane aspects of dumpster diving but also of how it critically engages with the contemporary form of life.

Encountering abundance

From a retailer’s point of view, foodspill is an indication of suboptimal logistics. The reasoning is clear: a supermarket would want to have consumers buy all the items that are for sale. Things thrown away are not only lost profit opportunities but potentially incur negative costs, as the supermarket itself has already paid the wholesale price for them. Hence, retail chains and shopkeepers work hard to keep their wastage rates as low as possible. Of course, low rates of wastage are in the consumer’s interest as well. Paying customers ultimately end up covering the costs not only of what they acquire but also of what is lost or discarded; the prices of sold products have to make up for the losses of those that cannot be purchased. The Finnish Grocery Trade Association discusses wastage on its website. According to its figures, of the total foodspill in Finland, the retailers’ share is 20%, which implies between 12 and 14 kilograms annually for every citizen. Of the food in shops, less than 2% goes to waste (Päivittäistavarakauppa 2020).¹ At first glance, this latter percentage might seem low, but one must consider that the total volume of goods circulated through grocery stores is nothing less than enormous. Therefore, even 1% wastage translates to massive quantities of food that end up in supermarkets’ backyards.

Thus, when voluntary dumpster divers enter a supermarket waste area, they encounter what they claim to be an abundance of food, much of it fully edible. This is an overarching theme in the interviews: according to the informants, as one *sees* how much food is thrown away, one understands the wealth amidst which Finns live today.

Antti has dumpster dived in both Copenhagen and Helsinki. When his parents learned about his practice, they asked whether the food is spoiled and whether he ever gets a stomach-ache. He responded by acknowledging that he does sometimes have indigestion – from having eaten too much, as the bins are so full. ‘I think it’s a common joke’, he says. What is it that dumpster divers find so much of and why? Bread is a staple people want to purchase when it is fresh and soft; hence, yesterday’s goods are cleared from the shelves. Another plentiful item is bananas, which most Finns seem to want to buy as either entirely yellow or with just a hint of green; these colours appear to guarantee freshness for several days, so the ones with brown spots will not be bought. Our informants also talk about lemon or sweet pepper being constantly available, partly because they are often on sale in closed packages; if one item in a bag has gone off, the others become just as unsellable. The same problem applies, of course, to many fresh foods. Therefore, vegetables such as tomatoes and carrots can often be found in good condition in dumpsters.

But every now and then people also come across exotic fruits, vacuum-packed salmon, cheese, chocolate, or even ice cream that has not yet melted. Salla tends to look for dairy products: 'Yogurt you find a lot, usually, you know, in the small cups'. Sami hunts especially for meat, whereas Milla follows a vegan diet and does not scavenge dairy products and meat even if they are available.

Indeed, according to our informants, one does not have to pick up everything edible when dumpster diving. To some extent, it is even possible to follow a diet or be picky, as Milla explains: 'There's so much bread that I usually of course choose rye bread because it always stays good the longest, and it tastes best, but every once in a while you pick up an odd baguette as well'. For Antti, the clearest indicator of the wealth available was when he was stunned to realize that a fellow diver only scavenged organic bread: 'He wouldn't touch other sorts. There's such a wide choice'.

In the interviews, people loved to talk about the odd occasion when they had found an enormous amount of something special. Perhaps a supermarket had erred in its orders, and the expiry date for a large number of items had passed. There might be a fault in the labelling of an entire batch of goods. Salla once found what 'must have been 30 kilos of potatoes', and she had to call up friends to help her. She also boasts about the time she found 'a full batch of cider because there were dents in the cans, but really nothing was wrong with them'. On another occasion she found a full case of spice oil: 'And the date wasn't even off. I don't know what was wrong with them, but we used those oils for a year, I think'. Taru, rummaging with a friend living in the same commune, once found an enormous amount of potato crisps: 'And then we had to throw a party to get them eaten'. Another time she came across 'a whole grey waste bin full of Edam cheese' and decided to 'only take the eight kilos that I could carry and leave the rest for anyone who came after me'.

According to Laura, one of the early lessons of scavenging is that it does not make sense to hoard: 'At first you just scoop absurd quantities'. However, that stops after a while, as dumpster divers 'learn that, well, we don't need absurd amounts of food, especially when the freezer is already full of bread'. Similarly, Irmeli talks about the moderation that she has taught herself, having to be 'sensible' and leaving some food at the site when her stores are already full. However, according to her, this can be 'agony', forcing her to pose the question: 'What if no one fetches all these goods and they are thrown away?'

Clearly, the problem for dumpster divers in the contemporary way of life is not scarcity but *an overflow that has to be managed*. As to leaving stuff behind, bad conscience comes up frequently in the discussions. Alina talks about eating unhealthy food simply because so much of it is available: 'There are totally shocking amounts of amazing treats and buns and stuff available, and then you binge for two weeks, and then, well then you feel that this wasn't really healthy. But in a sense, you had to!' Dumpster divers can have the feeling of being *obliged* to save not only the delicacies but also the rest of the food that is edible and risks being left behind. Taru explains how this sense of responsibility can turn an abundance of particular items into a diet that can be tiring: 'Bananas, for example, there are so many of them that you end up only eating bananas all the time. It's just so hard to leave them in the bins'.

We can now summarize some of the things that make our informants dumpster dive. According to them, it *does not make sense* to leave this abundance of food unused, but it

would also be *irresponsible* to leave it. Additionally, while *it feels great* to come across surprising finds, *it feels terrible* to leave food to be wasted. Reason and affect are deeply intertwined.

The intertwinement of reason and affect in voluntary dumpster diving

We identified in the interview data two different themes in which the entanglement of reason and affect is especially evident and relevant: first, the economic and ecological rationales of dumpster diving; and second, the sharing involved in this activity.

Let us begin with economic and ecological reasoning. Our informants are thoroughly convinced that voluntary dumpster diving is rational in two basic senses. First, from an ecological point of view, foodspill is bad, so using the nourishment found in supermarket backyards is good. Second, it is perfectly rational from an economic perspective to eat for free. According to Milla, the amount of food in supermarket backyards is a sign of sheer stupidity: 'It makes no sense'. She finds the situation 'horrible' and 'inconceivable', noting that 'there is so much good food, and you could fill so many stomachs with it'. Yet, there is some tension in the assessment, as she is personally quite happy with the situation in economic terms: 'It's brilliant that you get food for free'. The interviews make it clear that voluntary dumpster divers generally combine these two perspectives: while acting against the collective stupidity of foodspill, they also save money. Doing this *feels* good as well, as Antti puts it:

When you come home with two bags full of food, and you know it didn't cost a penny, well, you have the feeling that you somehow live ecologically. But secretly you think about others paying for it, while for some reason you don't. Ha ha.

Every now and then Antti has evaluated how much money he saves through dumpster diving, but the sense of having been clever is more important than the exact sums he calculates: 'It is about speculating how much the stuff would have cost when for me it only took an hour'. Our informants are surprised that more people do not imitate them. Tommi, for example, wonders why people do not dumpster dive when they are 'unemployed and short of money', adding, 'sometimes, you assess the worth of what you have found on a one-hour dive, for example, and it easily adds up to over a hundred euros'. When Laura practised dumpster diving most intensively, she still sometimes had to buy groceries during the day in the corner shop whose backyard she scavenged. Knowing that during the night she would obtain bananas and much else for free, she caught herself feeling 'stupid' for spending money and thinking: 'Why would I pay for these?'

During the period when Irmeli dumpster dived most frequently, she felt that 'it was really lovely' to find edibles for free and enjoyed calculating 'the worth of my haul'. Yet, in her interview, Irmeli wanted to stress that the money gained or lost was not that important. Instead, what mattered was the sense of *autonomy* that dumpster diving could provide: 'In relation to time management, it's about saving yourself, so that you don't have to go and work as much when you don't need to pay for all that food with money when you get it for free'. There is a sense of the good life being outside of the market economy, in relation to both consumption and labour. This view is emphasized by Jarkko who, thanks to dumpster diving, has a lot of spare time

that he can use for artistic projects with his friends. He says he gets along ‘with absurdly small amounts of money’.

The second aspect of the intertwining of reason and affect in our data involves practices of sharing. As the quotes above make clear, calculations are often intimately connected with the powerful affects produced by the knowledge of having done the right thing in both ecological and economic terms. By contrast, the appreciation of the practice being inherently fun, an end in itself, tends to come up when the different forms of togetherness that dumpster diving implies are discussed. A certain division of labour in the practice seems reasonable as well.

Although there is an overall abundance of food present in supermarkets’ waste areas, one cannot count on the availability of it at a given time or in a specific backyard. Nonetheless, when a good hunting ground is found, the catch tends to surpass one person’s needs, which justifies joining forces with others, as Jarkko explains: ‘When you dumpster dive, you almost always dive for more than you could eat by yourself, so it feels more reasonable to dive in a group’. It also makes sense to scatter a bit while engaging in the practice collectively, in order to cover a greater area than one person could. Furthermore, tasks can be shared once the divers are back home; the haul has to be sorted and cleaned, with some of it prepared for immediate eating or frozen for future use. All of this is more efficient when done in a group. At the same time, a shared meal after a diving trip can be one of the emotional high points of the week, as our informants often indicated; some call these occasions ‘trash parties’. Thus, while dumpster diving together and sharing the catch appears rational, the togetherness involved is also about pleasure; the excursion can be enjoyable in itself. As Salla says, there was a period in her life when dumpster diving was ‘simply a way of spending time with the friends’. When it becomes a shared pastime, the utility of this particular social form is less important, and dumpster diving achieves a ‘play form’; it becomes a sociable end in itself, in a Simmelian sense (Simmel 1958).

To clarify the way in which reason and affect are entangled in voluntary dumpster diving, we find useful Annemarie Mol’s (2008) elaborations on the ‘logic of choice’ and the ‘logic of care’. As the analyses above make clear, dumpster diving implies a range of situations of choice that are thoroughly reminiscent of everyday shopping: Will I have rye bread, or baguette, or a sugary bun? Bananas or sweet pepper today? Should I take the vacuum-packed meat to my friend as a gift, now that it’s available for free, even if I myself follow a vegan diet? Moreover, in a world of plenty, decisions have to be made about how much one will salvage: which parts of the abundance to abandon? In fact, one could claim that going behind the supermarket to get food from the bins in the first place, instead of visiting the proper shopping areas, is itself the result of a (rational) choice.

However, the idea of ‘choice’ easily limits the analyst to observing and judging actions *solely* in relation to their degree of rationality; that is, when choosing, actions appear successful when one dutifully does what follows from given premises. Thus, in relation to choice, if any affect is relevant, it comes either before the choice (in the realm of preferences) or after it (in the satisfaction gained). According to Mol, the logic of care is different. Instead of choice making, the core of this logic is the complexity and dynamism inherent in the practice – what happens when one is *doing* things, and how in such action, affect is entangled with reason.

Dumpster divers' ultimate motivation for the practice has to do with their willingness to care for the environment and to experiment with a lifestyle that accords with this aim. However, it is significant that caring relationships emerge out of their practice in a range of forms and scales, among which concern for the planet is only one. It is true that when the informants talk about 'not being able to' leave bananas on site and somehow feeling responsible for them, this surely implies caring about the *environment in general*. However, it is equally important that this attitude is also about caring about *specific bananas*: I cannot leave this one here, it's a real beauty! Mol discusses how those who care 'refuse to give up on anyone' (2008, 22). For dumpster divers, this attitude arises when pondering whether a particular broccoli, for instance, is still useful; maybe half of it could still be saved and eaten, even though it has partly gone bad? The slow hand-work with foodstuffs and their valuation comes up time and again in dumpster divers' accounts of their practice and in their willingness to *make* something out of the discarded staples they encounter (Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen 2020). The interviews reveal an ethos of helping the foodstuffs, abandoned by the supermarkets, to regain their dignity as still edible. All in all, Mol's conceptualization helps us to see analytically how there are different forms of reasoning present in dumpster diving. Under the logic of care, these can be entangled in multiple relation-making activities and a rich array of affects; they can also interfere with the logic of choice.

Communicating about dumpster diving

To summarize the findings of the previous sections, it is evident that, for our informants, it is not only rational but also often exciting to go dumpster diving. This leads to an important question: If the practice makes economic sense, is morally good and also fun, why is it not more openly advertised or undertaken? Posing this question leads us to discuss the way in which the practice is controversial in view of shared ideas of property, purity, and wealth. As the informants make clear, the transgressive nature of dumpster diving affects the ways they communicate about it with the outsiders.

The first transgression concerns the idea that one eats 'waste' – although the interviewees are quick to note that the food they find in the bins is in good condition, most often in neat and clean packages and totally unmarred. Contrary to what the uninformed might think, it is not as if 'you eat from someone's slop bucket', as Taru puts it, having a good laugh about the idea. Second, however, consuming what has been thrown away by others is immediately linked to poverty. Scavenging waste, living close to waste areas, and earning one's livelihood from waste are all usually interpreted as indices of a low social status (Reno 2009).

The third transgression concerns the understanding that the food one eats for free is, in fact, paid for by others: the shopkeepers and the customers. Of course, the reality is more complicated than that. It is obvious that there would be nothing to dumpster dive in the first place if the supermarkets did not willingly throw away edible food and if there did not exist, as the cause of such wastefulness, the knowledge that the paying customers could not be expected to pay for *those particular* items. Consequently, our informants are conscious about being free riders of the system, but none of them suffers from a guilty conscience for what they do. Indeed, they are proud of their practice.

Dumpster diving does not imply stealing others' *goods*; it is rather about picking up others' *bads* and turning them into something valuable.

The fourth transgression has to do with the fact that one finds food where one is not supposed to be. The items in a privately owned waste area are no longer the retailer's property but belong to the waste management firm, for which they are a (scarce) economic resource that can be used for producing valuable commodities like heat or biogas. Interestingly, none of the informants was completely clear as to whether dumpster diving is illegal; the practice is somehow situated in a grey area. It is revealing that when security guards or shop assistants happen to have intervened in our informants' dumpster diving, there have not been threats of being punished; dumpster divers have simply been asked to go away. Moreover, even if the activity is obviously not encouraged by supermarkets, it can sometimes be implicitly permitted, as the shopkeeper we interviewed acknowledged and the informants themselves have noticed.

While they are quite happy to dumpster dive, our informants freely acknowledge the aspects that others see as transgressions. This makes it hard for them to communicate about the practice with those not predisposed to be sympathetic. For example, while Alina is deeply committed to dumpster diving as part of her alternative lifestyle, she has not shared her long-standing practice of it with her mother, who she says has 'conservative values' and would immediately link scavenging waste to poverty. Alina presumes that, in general, middle-aged people like her mother hold the value of salaried work to be 'so sacred and important' that they would not understand anyone's willingness to step aside from such values and to use dumpster diving as an economic means to do so. Finally, her mother is, according to Alina, 'totally over-hygienic', as she is 'constantly' washing her hands. All in all, Alina thinks that there is no way her mother could understand why anyone would *want* to dumpster dive: 'Somehow it's related to so many things that can't be accepted'. While Alina does not wish to upset her mother, she finds the practice to be thoroughly rational and plans to continue with it, even if her life changes in other ways: 'Even if I had a well-paying job, I would still dumpster dive'. This defiant and self-assured attitude is not rare in the interviews; Sami may have put it most acutely: 'If I won the lottery, I would buy better gear for dumpster diving'.

Unlike Alina, most of the dumpster divers we have spoken with have told their family members about the practice. In some cases, this has required a bit of explaining but, in the end, the interviewees have succeeded in making others see why what they do is reasonable. In other cases, disseminating the information has been more problematic. For example, when Milla brought home food from supermarkets' waste areas as a teenager, there was a major row: 'There was shouting and others saying, "There's no way we eat this food"'. The 'drama' ended with Milla's mother making sure that the dumpster hauls would be compartmentalized and not touch the other food. Irmeli recounts a different case of (not) negotiating the practice with loved ones. She had learned to dumpster dive with her student friends, who lived in a commune. Finding the practice both reasonable and fun, she had started to do it on her own, as well. However, she did not say a word about it to her boyfriend, with whom she lived but who she expected would not approve. Thus, for half a year, she dumpster dived for most of the household's vegetables on her way home from evening courses without revealing the origins of the food to her boyfriend. The tension was obvious: 'At one point it came down to thinking

that I would now have to leave either dumpster diving or the boyfriend'. She opted for the latter choice, and the couple separated.

Such stories make it plain that, for its practitioners, dumpster diving can be part of a lifestyle with powerful existential implications: they continue to do it despite not being able to trust that others understand. However, while all our informants share a degree of self-satisfaction at having done it or continue to do it with pride, dumpster diving is not a project that they publicly promote. One could thus draw the conclusion, based on the interviews, that dumpster diving tends to be a distinctly *private* practice. The information about it is mostly communicated with those who are already known to share an alternative worldview.

As already noted, the relatively restricted circles in which our informants communicate about dumpster diving stands in interesting contrast with Barnard's findings (2016). In his New York City ethnography, he focuses on the 'waving the banana' side of the story: his freegans were eager to communicate actively about their practice and *wanted* to be seen. They organized events where the amount of food thrown away would become visible to passers-by. Among the stories and experiences collected from our informants, by contrast, there is not a single example of such an activity. Indeed, the interviews suggest that there would be no point in talking about these people primarily in terms of being something like 'foodspill activists'. This being so, does this not lead one to pose a legitimate question concerning the supposedly 'critical' side of the practice?

Being critical: attitude and action

When discussing social criticism, it is useful to distinguish between *attitude* and *action*. Even if people hold critical views on a given issue, they may not find ways to operationalize these views into actions. The voluntary dumpster divers that we have spoken with voice a fundamentally critical attitude to existing retail institutions and a range of issues, many of which have been touched upon already in the previous sections:

- The informants are critical of the commodity aesthetics that are especially prevalent in the retail spaces for fruit, bread, and confections. For the purposes of creating a seductive shopping experience, a paradise of plenty is put on display, and no signs of decay are allowed. Things have to seem timelessly fresh, which of course is a paradox.
- Current forms of packaging are harmful. Does it make sense to bundle items such that if one mandarin orange in a package of ten goes bad, the whole package must be thrown away?
- However, our interviewees are relatively understanding of shopkeepers who throw away things they are not able to sell. Thus, when voluntary dumpster divers find fault in the prevailing commodity aesthetics, rather than simply condemning retail chains, they criticize the masses of consumers. If people cannot stand any spots in their bananas or other slightly faulty items, this will entail wastefulness. Here, our informants' judgement underlines the disparity between attitude and action in the average consumer's life: it does not help to deplore contemporary wastefulness – a concern that easily generates support among the Finnish public – if one will always choose to buy only the perfect item and wants to see the supermarket's fruit department or café's confection shelves full, even just before closing time.

- Retail regulators, shopkeepers, and consumers are all blamed for being too unquestioning of what dumpster divers see as ‘rigid’ ideas of hygiene. The category of ‘waste’ itself is affected by this critique: voluntary dumpster divers aim to force a displacement in the thinking concerning what is ‘matter out of place’, to quote the famous Mary Douglas (1966, 36) definition of pollution.
- The interviewees find it simply stupid that waste is not only being locked down but more recently also actively guarded; Sami, for example, sees this as ‘totally absurd’.
- The informants also display a critical attitude regarding the need to use money to acquire goods. They often underline the value of dumpster diving in view of creating if not complete autonomy in relation to the money economy, at least a distance from it.
- Finally, although the issues above can be analytically distinguished from one another, it is their totality – the *general form of the retail institution* – and through it, *the form of life* of which voluntary dumpster divers are especially critical. Their criticism is holistic; the informants cite ‘market economy’ and ‘capitalism’ among the things of which they disapprove, so singling out shopkeepers, fellow consumers, or standards of hygiene is of secondary importance.

Through dumpster diving, our informants have found a way of turning attitude into action – or to be more precise, their actions and attitudes are not decoupled, not separate from each other, and there is no pre-eminence between the two. It is not a case where attitudes would exist outside of the way people respond to the world. Thus, it is safe to say that, for these people, dumpster diving is an inherently critical practice. Although it is meaningful in other respects as well, our informants would not voluntarily engage in this activity unless it was a way in which they could live out their strong political and moral commitments. However, there are two features in their criticism that stand out: first, they are not trying to generalize their own actions; second, they see dumpster diving as a way to guard their integrity within the capitalist system. We take a deeper look into these issues in the rest of this section.

The dumpster divers we have spoken with do not appear to expect to affect markedly others’ behaviour. They do not hold great hopes for a better tomorrow. Being critical and turning this attitude into action does not entail a horizon where everybody follows. This can be linked with the media materials on dumpster diving, of which a fair amount is available; as Barnard (2016) also attests, the theme is obviously seen as titillating from the broader public’s point of view. Often, when the media report on voluntary dumpster diving, one of their questions is obvious: ‘Do you think that everyone could dumpster dive?’ As researchers, we have also felt the urge to pose this question. However, it is clearly misplaced; in fact, it is not a true and open question at all. Rather, it is a shibboleth, a test of recognizing a paradox. Wanting to universalize the practice would surely be an absurd position to hold; with no paying customers, there would be no food available in supermarkets or, consequently, in their bins. It is thus not surprising that none of our informants was blind to the basic paradox that comes with their lifestyle; while they were critical of others’ wasteful behaviours, their own activity was acknowledged as depending on this very wastefulness (Barnard 2016; Fernandez, Brittain, and Bennett 2011; Guillard and Roux 2014). Two informants independently came up with the same provocative self-description when discussing this theme, with Tommi claiming

that ‘in a sense, I’m nothing but a parasite’ and Sami affirming that his lifestyle is based on a ‘parasite economy’.

It is worth pausing here to take seriously the self-characterization shared by Tommi and Sami. The critical relationship they have to the retail institution does not purport to be reciprocal. They do not wish to give anything back; they just take. Following Michel Serres (2007), such unidirectionality can be regarded as the defining feature of a parasitic relationship. Importantly, for Sami and Tommi, this unidirectionality is at the core of being critical in their actions and not just their attitudes. Instead of *adding* something to the capitalistically structured complex of production, retail, and consumption, they *subtract* from this complex. They do not fully participate in it, but they use and appropriate some of its wasted parts.

This insight can be generalized: the critical practice of dumpster diving is fundamentally defined by the refusal to play the game that is given as self-evident. Another way to clarify the idea is to use the term *plug-in*, as developed by Bruno Latour (2005). In principle, the retail environment aims to format the consumer as someone who is affected by the presentation of commodities in the shops and then chooses between them, and whose relationship to the entire retail complex is structured by money and its scarcity. Voluntary dumpster divers refuse to plug in to any of these affordances. Rather, they plug in to precisely what was meant to be *outside* the circuit: the waste bins in the backyards and the foodstuffs in them. Thus, being critical for them implies *withdrawal* from the game that is supposed to format them through the available and advertised plug-ins. This also implies a parasitic subtraction of the by-products of the system: using the system but refusing to give anything back to it. Indeed, our informants are systematic about not even wanting to be thankful to the retail institutions.

All in all, as a critical practice, there appears to be no universalizing tendency in dumpster diving for our informants. One’s own actions are not regarded as a simple ‘standard’ for others to obey. It is not a question of some golden rule that *everybody* could or should follow. As Jarkko says, to demand something like that would be as absurd as to expect that ‘everybody should be a GP’. There is something consciously more limited and situational in the rationale of dumpster diving in terms of its being critical action. It is what should be done in the here and now, by *us*, given our circumstances. This even applies to those cases in which the interviewees express the feeling that ‘more people should dumpster dive’, as Laura put it. In fact, the informants appear to be happy to disclose the places where they get the best catch and would gladly see more people dumpster dive; ‘there is so much of it’, as Milla says. Still, this is clearly an assessment of what is locally possible rather than an outline of a utopia, a ‘complete’ solution, or a generalized moral order.

The reverse side of the situational nature of dumpster diving as a critical practice is that there is not much hope in the air in our interviews. In general, our informants do not think that even their own critical action will make much of a difference in the system. Instead of profoundly changing capitalism, voluntary dumpster diving appears to be a way in which the practitioners can create and hold on to *a sense of integrity* within capitalism.

Milla is completely conscious of the fact that ‘dumpster diving is not possible without capitalism or the market economy; of course, it’s part of it’. However, the practice provides ‘a means with which to halt consumption, or at least perhaps to diminish it a bit’.

Critical ecological thinking goes hand in hand with this view: ‘We only have one planet, and the resources here are limited, so this is a way in which you can make an impact somehow; well, this is a small impact, very small, but still’. When Taru reflects on dumpster diving, the main affect she is left with is a combination of shock and sadness at having witnessed the enormous amounts of discarded food; however much she dives, there would always be food left: ‘The world is not saved by me taking that little share of the edible food there’. Rather than saving the world, she seems to be saving her own soul. Yet, instead of being paralyzed by this dispiriting situation or sinking into nihilism, she does something; however small, it is her share, the least she can do. For Sami, the most important reason to dumpster dive is that thus he can live ‘inside the capitalist system’ with full integrity. Dumpster diving allows him to create ‘a space of autonomy’.

Jarkko thinks he has found a ‘secret’: living for free, getting to sleep late, not having to work much, spending time with friends on loosely artistic endeavours. He would be glad to share the secret, ‘but even if you advertise it everywhere, everyone still wakes up at eight in the morning, goes to work on Tuesday, and constantly complains how it sucks’. Jarkko thinks that it is the unlimited urge to consume that enslaves the average adult. Thus he describes sarcastically how people complain about food being ‘so expensive’ and whine that ‘it’s crap you have to go to work’, but they feel they have to ‘because the telly has again become too small’. For Jarkko, if people could grasp the need to rid themselves of many of their desires and their expectations for constant growth, what he calls the ‘secret’ of living without needing much money would be available to them. The key thing would be to follow the ethos that he describes as follows: ‘What if I try to feed myself and people near me as inexpensively and nicely as I can and still place the smallest possible burden on the environment. This would be a great idea if it spread’. This is a critical idea, an attitude, an ethos in the Foucauldian sense, that Jarkko himself has been able to put into action through dumpster diving. However, he does not do much to promote or disseminate it, and he does not expect others to follow his example.

Discussion: dumpster diving as a way of criticizing and coping with capitalism

Having described our informants’ views and experiences of dumpster diving, it is now time to resituate their practice on the landscape of academic writing. We began this article by emphasizing the ordinariness of critical activity, drawing on the tradition of pragmatic sociology and, especially, Boltanski’s (2009) distinction between ‘institution’ and ‘critique’. According to Boltanski, institutions stabilize reality and help present it as self-evident; critique, for its part, is about opening up the possibilities of questioning and reshaping reality as a given. This distinction provides a baseline understanding for the pragmatic criticism evident in voluntary dumpster diving. However, it can be further nuanced with the help of – and in contrast with – other theoretical resources which also help in making the concept of ‘critical practice’ resonate more widely instead of being confined to the case of dumpster diving described thus far in the text. So, in the following we seek points of comparison by turning to three influential texts that deal with marginal yet creative positions vis-à-vis capitalism: *The Practice of Everyday Life* by de Certeau (1984), *The Mushroom at the End of the World* by Anna Tsing

(2015), and the elaborations on the distinction between ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari present in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987).

Highlighting the little skills that people deploy to use given resources in unpredictable ways and to silently generate room for manoeuvre in confined situations, Certeau’s (1984) description of the opportunistic and creative ‘tactics’ of everyday life could be viewed as an apt depiction of also what dumpster divers do. While the setting in which dumpster divers deploy their tactics is dictated by the capitalist system, they are nevertheless able to use the very forces of this system against itself in subversive ways. However, the kind of *unintentionally* achieved ‘second production’ that Certeau appears to hold essential to the practices of everyday life is not at the core of *voluntary* dumpster divers’ practice insofar it is *critical*; they do not simply end up twisting the system, despite themselves, as it were, but are highly conscious about wanting to do so.

The aspect of voluntariness and the tensions related to it are more at the core of Tsing’s (2015) descriptions of mushroom picking in the ‘capitalist ruins’. Her book is a rich ethnography of the relations around *Matsutake*, a mushroom that is impossible to cultivate but is highly valued as a global commodity. It thrives especially in the ‘ruined’ landscapes that industrial forestry has left in its wake. This aspect of treasures being hunted and picked up in the wastelands of capitalism is of course structurally close to the practice of dumpster diving. While the constancy of destruction and uncontrolled overflows characterizes capitalist production, some people find their living precisely in the spaces that have been marked out as areas of abandonment. The leftovers are salvaged and appropriated to generate new value. A further analogy with dumpster diving comes from the way in which, for the mushroom pickers of different ethnicities and life histories described by Tsing, the *Matsutake* is a symbol of freedom and autonomy. In going to the woods, they make a living, sometimes a surprisingly good one, but they simultaneously *get away* from pressures elsewhere. Nonetheless, precariousness, marginality, and the very question of survival constantly remain present.

Despite important resonances, there remains a major difference between Tsing’s mushroom pickers and voluntary dumpster divers. According to Tsing, the *Matsutake* economy is a case of what she calls ‘salvage capitalism’: the highest value generated and garnered is, in the end, amassed by capitalists elsewhere. Though dumpster diving, too, is about salvaging, its results, by contrast, are entirely subtracted from the circuit of capital. While the practitioners give new life to the discarded foodstuffs they encounter, that food is not recommodified later. Consequently, it is easy to comprehend why our informants can regard their activity as not only ecologically sound but also as in a confrontational relationship with capitalism – a stance that appears neither directly relevant to nor evident in most of the mushroom picking practices described by Tsing.

To grasp this confrontational relationship with capitalism which is coupled with an effort to live creatively on its margins, we find it helpful to draw on the notion of *minority* presented by Deleuze and Guattari. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), they develop this concept primarily in relation to minor languages, but ethnic minorities and sexual politics are also implicated. According to these authors, a majority is only secondarily defined by quantitative dominance, by simply outnumbering the minority. More important is the establishment of a *constant* – a standard. A majority is characterized by the normative stability of a practice and the ensuing lack of dynamism and variation. In this respect, minorities, in fact, often emulate majorities and try to become like them: they try to

establish their own stable rules and norms – for example, to solidify the standards for defining the ‘proper’ Québécois French or Jamaican English. By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari are more interested in the way in which minoritarian practices are about *variation and change* within the field defined by a majority. A minoritarian practice is about creation and becoming rather than about the paucity of its numbers. It makes the order given by the majority porous and shaky, deterritorializes it rather than makes oneself submissive within it (i.e. reterritorialization), triggers fluctuations, and shows how the order can become unstable. To put the matter in one of Deleuze and Guattari’s favourite figures of speech, a minoritarian usage of language can make the majority language ‘stutter’. What a minority does to a majority, whether in the realm of language or politics, is to force the majority practice to vary, to become something new by means of making it *less* rather than by adding to it.

When translated to the realm of dumpster diving, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of minority helps emphasize that the aim of dumpster divers is definitely not to make their mode of activity a generalized norm or a constant. This would be a patently absurd ultimate aim and is recognized as such by all our informants. Instead, voluntary dumpster diving makes the retail infrastructure stutter. Although the practice does not have a major societal effect and is not widely adopted, it does present a problem for the supermarket chains and individual shopkeepers who are not quite sure how to react. Hence, while there have been reports about retailers going so far as to poison the food they throw away,² and while our informants testify that over the past ten years waste areas have started to be more carefully locked and guarded, the interviewees also report experiences of people in the trade silently facilitating dumpster diving by looking the other way. This tacit approval is also attested by the shopkeeper we interviewed. Even if one should not exaggerate the effect that the marginal activity of dumpster diving has, it is notable how it can provoke a hesitant response and how it presents a case of a critical mode of activity that *works* – twists, moulds, and shapes – the contemporary way of life. It does not add anything to capitalism but *subtracts* something from it, literally its excess.

While the conceptualizations provided by Certeau, Tsing, and Deleuze and Guattari are useful in characterizing specific features of voluntary dumpster diving, it is also by what they lack that they help bring to light the distinctiveness of our object of study. They are all helpful for recognizing and articulating resourceful actions in the margins and what transformative effects such actions can have, but they all appear to miss something that is crucial for our interviewees: as a critical practice, voluntary dumpster diving has effects on the practitioners, as well. This links with the very first lines of the present article, Foucault’s (1984a, 50) formulations concerning the ‘critical ontology of ourselves’. As the consciously critical element of the practice needs to be emphasized, when compared to Certeau’s, Tsing’s, and Deleuze and Guattari’s studies, it also needs to be highlighted how essential it is for our informants that voluntary dumpster diving enables them to guard their integrity. The relation to self is central and has to do with being able to *cope* with ongoing ecological destruction and capitalism. How does one carve out a place that is liveable and provides a sense of having some independence? Our informants respond by criticizing a system that they think is rotten through their consumption of what others regard as rotten food. Thus, they retain and sustain their integrity.

To sum up, our informants care about the world through caring about foodspillage and about themselves, while confronting 'the limits that are imposed on us' and experimenting 'with the possibility of going beyond them' (Foucault 1984a, 50). While Foucault's words might sound pompous and dramatic, in the case of voluntary dumpster diving they also resonate with the mundane and concrete deeds of experimenting with multiple cultural limits that have to do with purity and danger. These involve simple everyday gestures like trespassing on the waste areas, challenging the limits of use-by dates, and generally being ready to find treasures in the abundance of food that the institutional reality continually categorizes as waste.

Conclusions

In this article, we have inquired into voluntary dumpster diving for food as a critical practice. Even though in our study we to some extent drew on the type of practice theory that highlights the importance of routine action and that is much used in contemporary consumer research, we think that the analysis of dumpster diving significantly also brings into light other aspects, those foregrounded by the so-called French pragmatism: the creative and reflective side of practices. Nevertheless, we have also aimed to make a contribution to the tradition of the pragmatic sociology of critique by articulating how dumpster diving amounts to an activity that, in many respects, follows different procedures than what is commonly expected from mundane 'social critique'. What sets the practice apart is that, for the interviewees, deeds in the margins are more important than discourses; they do not seek public visibility, and their primary objective is not the open politicization of the food supply system. It amounts to an inward rather than outward, and an indirect rather than direct critical practice focused more on cultivating an ecologically sound and morally coherent lifestyle that is personally gratifying than directly confronting the state or the social structure. Studying dumpster diving, as we have argued, provides thus a view on lifestyle politics that is irreducible to sheer lifestyle preferences and is not an organized social movement, either, but rather presents a fascinating combination of private actions, often with like-minded friends, and effort to social change. We also suggested that the critical aspects of the practice are fundamentally entangled with other elements; while dumpster diving enables people to guard and create a critical distance from contemporary retail forms, it is simultaneously simply a means to obtain food for free and, every now and then, a social form that creates possibilities for pleasurable joint activity and sharing.

Being able to draw back from the wastefulness of contemporary capitalism and the ecological irrationalism at work in the retail sector is the fundamental driver behind our informants' interest in voluntary dumpster diving, in both rational and affective terms. Following Boltanski (2008, 87–89), *taking distance* can be regarded as the foundational gesture of criticism. Dumpster divers achieve this concretely through their ways of procuring everyday essentials, through a practice that they conceive of as a local and personal counterstroke to the irrationality represented by global capitalism. But the nature of the 'distance' they take is peculiar, as the practitioners are actually the true *insiders* of the capitalist 'ruins' (Tsing 2015) in their appreciation of the abundance of abandoned food. They are the connoisseurs of the dirty core of contemporary forms of retail, playing along with capitalism and parasiting it – yet somehow refusing to be completely reducible to it.

Dumpster divers call into question what is presented as a self-evident institutional necessity: essentials must be bought in a shop, and one needs money to do this. Living on the margins, our informants are able to increase the space in which they feel autonomous and able to retain their own integrity within the unecological form of life that surrounds them.

Notes

1. It is estimated that 20% of all food produced in the European Union is lost or wasted (European Commission 2020, 15).
2. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/sweden/3460840/German-supermarket-Lidl-apologises-for-poisoning-homeless.html>

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