English protest chant, circa 1600

- The law locks up the man or woman
  Who steals the goose from off the common
But lets the greater felon loose
Who steals the commons from the goose
The Freegan Phenomenon: Anti-Consumption or Consumer Resistance?

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Background

• There is a growing volume of research on ideologies and practices of consumer resistance which attempt to challenge or change the unsustainable consumption practices characterizing many developed economies (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Sandlin and Callahan, 2009).
Extant research dedicated to culture jamming (e.g., Sandlin and Callahan, 2009), boycotting, voluntary simplicity (e.g., Shaw and Newholm, 2002), consumer emancipation (e.g., Kozinets, 2002), and consumer resistance (e.g., Penaloza and Price, 1993) addresses motivations, ideologies, and practices of these phenomena.
Gaps

• Ambiguities exist regarding redundant terminology and, consequently, the possibility of arriving at a grand theory of anti-consumption (Lee, Fernandez, and Hyman, 2009).

• Particular issues in this domain include the ability of consumers to defy markets (Arnould, 2007; Kozinets, 2002a), the overlap of anti-consumption and consumer resistance discourses (Cherrier, 2009), and the collective vs. individual anti-market actions (Cherrier, 2009).
Context for Exploring Contentions

• Freeganism- “Freegans are people who practice strategies for everyday living based on sharing resources, minimizing the detrimental impact of our consumption, reducing and recovering waste and independence from the profit-driven economy (Freegan.info, 2010)
“Looks like someone enjoys an open dumpster even more than I do, to the point where he or she resorted to vigilante-ism to liberate this dumpster.”
Methodology

• Netnographic analysis of the Freegan World listserv postings from January 2004 to December 2009 (1800 members).
  
  – This forum facilitates information exchange and advice regarding alternative consumption practices, requests for volunteers in certain areas, calls to join protests and activities worldwide, reflections and discussions regarding Freegan philosophy and ideology, and other related discussions.
Methodology (cont.)

• To supplement the netnographic findings obtained in one online forum, and to be able to generalize the findings, as well as to provide corroborative evidence, other related websites were content-analyzed by both authors.
  – E.g., Freegan.info, funkypunkyg.blogspot.com, freejunkfood.blogspot.com
Methodology (cont.)

• To compare internal Freegan discourses with external evaluation of the Freegan movement (Holland and Einwohner, 2004) and to provide a more objective assessment of online-based findings through data triangulation, we employed a content analysis of 56 essays.
Internal Freegan Identities and Distinct Strategies and Behaviors

Freegans

- Apolitical (Anti-consumption)
  - Strategy for resolving perceived conflict between own values and the values of capitalism
    - Non-violent Action, Non-confrontational Action
      - Working less, refrain from spending, repair and reuse, use waste as resource, sharing, composting, foraging, community gardens,

- Political (Consumer Resistance)
  - Revolutionary strategy for dismantling capitalism
    - Violent, Confrontational Action
      - Squatting, shoplifting, stealing, returning stolen merchandise for credit, cutting locks on dumpsters
Apolitical (Anti-consumption)

- Individuals who engage in Freegan practices because of lack of resources, sense of adventure, or feelings of personal responsibility for reducing ecological deterioration.
- Parallel Fournier’s (1998) “minimization behaviors”
- Characterized by heterogeneity of views, approaches, and activities, as opposed to ideological coalescence
Anti-consumption Excerpts

• “Its eco-friendly. I'm recycling and/or using everything I find!”

• “I love the food, clothes, dishes, and everything else that I find. Even if it's a little bad, it's still better than paying lots of money. This resource allows me to live the way I want to, without relying on a full-time job.”

• “Cause people throw out the coolest sh*t!”
Anti-consumption Excerpts

• “yes indeed dumpstering is the only affordable way to feed a house full of hippies. We eat far better than we would if we actually had to BUY the food.. because of course we are poor and would end up eating lots of ramen noodles etc...”

• “Its fun! There are many crazy adventures to be had while dumpster diving.”

• “I have no money, so getting things for free is awesome!”
Consumer Resistance

• A radical consumer resistance ideology of defying the capitalist economy and engaging in alternative consumption “beyond capitalism” with the goal of undermining the system and preparing for its demise.

• Characterized by a more politically active stance, as evidenced by calls to civil disobedience and protests published in member blogs
Consumer Resistance Excerpts

• “Freegans say enough of this. We want no part. We reject it all — the drive for status, the lust for wealth, the sense of power and accomplishment from the purchase of needless commodities. We provide for our needs without feeding the monster. In a system inextricable from oppression, our jobs will ultimately harm others, the money we spend will be cycled into an economy that harms others.”
Consumer Resistance Excerpts

• **Reference to shoplifting**- “You can't be afraid to act on something that is right simply because you are afraid of hurting a huge corporation's feelings. Those that choose to create laws because of it are those that were not on your side in the first place. Playing nice with businesses reminds me of asking for bigger cages for factory farmed animals.”

• “Direct action on the part of multitudes living outside capitalism will deliver the death blow to the remaining capitalist and state institutions and expropriate the remainder of resources held by the state and the capitalists to the commons.”
Consumer Resistance Excerpts

• “We need to work both within the system and outside of the system to slow the pace of ecological destruction, dismantle industrial infrastructure, and to defend and act in solidarity with humans and other animals who are being ruthlessly exploited under capitalism. This will require a diversity of legal and illegal tactics.”
Freegan: External Assessment

**Hero Archetype:**
Viewed as courageous and facilitators of social change

- Generate Hope → Social Action → Social Change

**Vagrant Archetype:**
Seen as lazy individuals with parasitic lifestyle

- Generate Anger → Alienation/Entrenchment

**Functional Archetype:**
Seen as a niche group that plays a functional role in society by consuming waste

- Balance out Society → Authenticity
Essay Excerpts

• Hero Archetype:

• Vagrant Archetype:
  – “Parasites”, “deranged”, “too lazy”, “nasty lazy people”, “criminal”, “irresponsible”

• Functional Archetype:
  – “Useful”, “reduce waste”, “good for the environment”, “help conserve world resources”, “voluntary waste managers”
Discussion

• **Consumer Resistance Freegans** - “Trying to separate Freegans from Freegan philosophy is like trying to separate religious people from the belief in God. Without their belief in God, they wouldn’t be religious. Without our philosophy, we wouldn’t be Freegans.” (Aug. 3, 2009).

• **Anti-Consumption Freegans** - engage in social interaction for support and sharing ideas and advice with like-minded others, as well as for self-expression and self-reflection.
Conclusions

• Freeganism represents a broad spectrum of practices and opinions that share a common idea of ecological responsibility.

• Both the market-defying political rhetoric of consumer resistance and market-mediated anti-consumption activities are prominent in the Freegan discourse.

• This research confirms and illustrates earlier research conclusions about a continuum-like nature of consumer resistance movements (Cherrier, 2009; Fournier, 1998).
Moving Forward

• Our exploratory findings are consistent with sociological conceptualization of resistance as multidimensional (Holland and Einwohner 2004). Resistance involves oppositional action (examine via intention and recognition).

• Examine the relative stability of Freeganism (Glass 2009) despite the heterogeneity of members ideologies along the consumer resistance and anti-consumption continuum.