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The anti-consumption lifestyle: The cultural work of activist practices

It's March 2009, and I'm in a car with four anarchists in Oakland, California. I've hitched a ride with them back to Los Angeles from the annual Bay Area Anarchist Book Fair, where we've all spent the weekend. Two of the people in the car are people I've interviewed for my research, Tina and Raychel. I've known them for several weeks, and have spent time with them at events and meetings of the anarcha-feminist group they're involved with. We had all traveled to the book fair to distribute literature and network with other activists. When I get in the car and thank them for giving me a ride, they say it's no problem, that it's just "mutual aid"—the anarchist principle of cooperation and generosity.¹ Before leaving Oakland, we stop for lunch at a vegan, organic restaurant (everyone in the group is a practicing vegan but me). It turns out to be quite expensive, so we drive around for at least 20 minutes looking for another restaurant that serves vegan food (we end up settling on a vegetarian Thai restaurant). Our last stop before hitting the road is a gas station to fill up. The driver and owner of the car insists we find a Chevron station—he's recently read an article about the 20 "worst" corporations and Chevron was one of the only oil companies not on it (the criteria for "worst" are unclear to me but I presume some sort of ethical standard was given in the article). I'm able to locate a Chevron station using my cell phone, and we make our way there. While he fills up the tank, Raychel goes into the station's bathroom to brush her teeth.

As Raychel is walking back to the car, a man asks her for change, saying he is hungry and wants to buy some food. In keeping with the spirit of mutual aid, she goes back into the station and buys him a burrito using her credit card, since she didn't have any cash on her to give to him. Raychel relates this to the rest of us in the car as we are setting off on the highway. She expresses

regret that she purchased non-vegan food for the man (the burrito contained cheese), since she herself is a militant vegan who is very active and outspoken in the animal rights movement. Though Raychel is apologetic, Tina still points out that Raychel was supporting a system of cruelty by paying for the dairy product. This hurts Raychel's feelings—she is obviously bothered by Tina's comment and spends the next several minutes trying to justify her act.

While this road trip was one of the more informal experiences I had as part of my fieldwork, it ended up being paradigmatic because of the observations I was able to make about how these anarchists approach everyday practices of consumption. It was a paradigmatic episode because it encapsulated so many aspects of how anarchist activists approach their everyday decisions about consumption. The individuals in this group readily shared their resources with both acquaintances and strangers, citing anarchist principles. They sought out particular kinds of commodities for themselves, going out of their way when other options would have been more convenient. They also held themselves and each other accountable for purchases that involved compromises to their ethical values. And this was all in the space of about an hour. Their practices seem to be clear illustrations of what Sam Binkley calls, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, “self-problematization”: “a holding up of some aspect of one's daily conduct as the object of serious ethical scrutiny and concern, at the center of which is a discourse with others on the appropriate shape of such behavior for the purposes of an ethical goal of one sort or another” (Binkley 2007a: 131). These individuals' discursive activity *around* their acts of consumption is particularly consistent with Binkley's Foucaultian picture of ethical practice.

I use the term “anti-consumption” to refer to the kinds of consumer activism that some anarchists, like the ones on my road trip, engage in. The range of specific practices encompassed by anti-consumption will become clear as this chapter progresses. Anti-consumption is part of the fabric of everyday life for the anarchist activists I discuss here. Anarchist anti-consumers do not universally abstain from consumption; indeed, such a feat would be impossible. Rather, they consume differently, in ways that *signify* an opposition to the kinds of lifestyles encouraged by the bourgeois consumer culture. To say that anarchists consume differently is not to say that they never participate in the same kinds of consumption activities that “regular” people do, just that, on the whole, they cultivate a different consumer habitus (Bourdieu 1984) or “way of being in the world” (Clarke et al. 2005: 54). And when they do consume in similar *material* ways to mainstream consumers, they often *discursively* frame their consumption activities as contra to the overall system of consumer capitalism. This is what makes their anti-consumption lifestyles understandable *as* activism.

In this chapter, I emphasize the ways in which anti-consumption carries cultural and political significance for participants in activist movements, despite the fact that a purely non-consumptive lifestyle is an impossible

achievement for anyone. My hope is that this emphasis on the discursive work of anti-consumption will provide a counterpoint to dismissals that see anti-consumption as simply ineffective or hypocritical in its attempts to overturn capitalism. Like all resistant practices, anti-consumption “does” much more than directly subvert its object of opposition. In other words, the objective of anti-consumption cannot simply be reduced to opposing consumption. People may espouse an anti-consumption position for a variety of reasons, only some of which have to do with fighting the system of consumer capitalism. I will discuss these various reasons in depth in the second half of this chapter. In doing so, I hope to reinforce the idea that any analysis or evaluation of anti-consumption as a political practice must work from an enlarged understanding of resistance and its potential “effects.”

Practices of anti-consumption

Several of the individuals I interviewed explained that once they began to identify as anarchists, they started refusing to consume things that many middle-class Americans consider to be basic features of everyday life. Anarchists, in fact, have a centuries-old tradition of assuming “voluntary poverty,” which is the chosen state of having just enough to meet one’s basic needs (Woodcock 1979: 32). Josef described himself as “an anarchist Los Angeles pirate” because he chose to forego “luxuries” like having a car and a stable home. For anarchists like Josef, needs are distinguished from luxuries through a critical lens that understands most consumer desires to be the product of false consciousness, induced by corporations, in the interest of promoting rampant material acquisition. The logic of voluntary poverty is that once individuals become aware that their needs are falsely imposed by marketers, they can willfully decide to do without many consumer products they may have previously considered necessary.

Personal hygiene is a notable area in which many anarchists do without products that mainstream consumers buy as a matter of course. Grant said that since becoming involved with anarchism, he no longer felt it necessary to take a shower every day. For him, this was about “being comfortable with the way your body naturally exists and not succumbing to pressure from the dominant society.” Mass-marketed soaps, shampoos, and deodorants are all seen as unnecessary chemicals foisted upon consumers by greedy capitalists. The authors of a popular anarchist book *Days of War, Nights of Love* (CrimethInc. 2000: 121) assert that “western” [sic] standards of cleanliness are rooted in class hierarchies, wherein “those who possessed the wealth and power required to have the leisure to remain indoors, inactive, scorned the peasants and travelers whose lifestyles involved getting their hands and bodies dirty.” They go on to argue that “these days, cleanliness is defined more by corporations selling ‘sanitation products’ . . . When we accept their

definition of ‘cleanliness’ we are accepting their economic domination of our lives” (122–3). The way to subvert these hierarchies, they argue, is to reject hygiene standards in one’s daily routine.

Veganism is another common form of anti-consumption among anarchists. Vegans refuse to consume meat and dairy, along with fur, leather, wool, and cosmetics tested on animals. The decision not to consume any animal-derived products may be constructed as a practice of political solidarity with non-human creatures, against an industry that systematically exploits human power over animals. Many of my interviewees were vegetarians before they learned about or identified with anarchism, but “went vegan” when they became able to connect an anarchist opposition to hierarchy with their previous distaste for animal slaughter. Sally explained how veganism is, for her, also an explicit protest against ideological manipulation by capitalist interests:

I had become vegetarian for a couple months at a time in high school and that was very much based on sort of the emotional not wanting to eat animals sense, but then I don’t think it really stuck until it became a lot more political and about consumption and about . . . the kinds of consumption that capitalism encourages you to have . . . especially the marketing to think you need to eat so much meat and need to drink so much milk, that really started bothering me and seeing it as just creating a need that just isn’t there

Another interviewee named Branch similarly explained that anarchist vegans see their diets “as avoiding ‘the system’ in terms of the meat industry or the dairy industry, practices of, you know, modern-day sort of farming and agriculture and things like that.” For Branch too, specialized dietary practices had followed his politicization and integration into a local anarchist community. Importantly, anarchist veganism is about resisting the systemic power relationship between humans and the animals they consume; that is, it may not have much to do with an actual distaste for the human consumption of animal products per se. As Josef, who is also vegan, explained, “Yeah, believe me if I had my own cow, I would make my own cheese! And I’d love it and I’d make it a dharma cow and it’d have jewelry, but you know, that’s not feasible for me, I live in the city. I don’t want to contribute to animal slavery.” Anarchists like Josef are against the *industrialization* of animal production, which turns capitalism’s exploitative relations against animals on a mass scale.

Anarchists are especially wary of consumer “needs” that involve environmental degradation or the waste of natural resources. Of course, this criteria covers almost all consumption, but a few practices in particular are notable. Flushing the toilet, for example, is a rather mundane and automatic

activity for most people, but it is problematic for many anarchists. (Many people may not even consider toilet flushing an act of “consumption,” but of course it consumes fresh water). In response to my questions about everyday things he does “because of his politics,” Josef laughingly volunteered, “I pee outside because of my politics, not because I’m a freak.” He went on to explain:

I’m not gonna waste like a gallon and a half of water that we’re stealing from the Colorado River just cuz I took a pee, you know like, ‘if it’s yellow let it mellow,’ you know, don’t flush it. But I mean, you gotta keep some sort of hygiene, but urine is pretty clean. I mean, water a bush, you know?

An anti-consumerism zine I picked up at an anarchist book fair also includes a section on water consumption, in which it admonishes readers, “Don’t flush when you pee! It won’t hurt you, pee just sits in the toilet, not bothering anyone; it doesn’t warrant the 10 gallons per flush just to get rid of it” (koala!, n.d.: 10). The inside of the front cover of the zine is a sheet of warning labels reading: “DON’T FLUSH! If it’s yellow let it mellow! (or go outside . . . fun for you, good for plants!).” Handwritten instructions on the page also urge readers to photocopy these labels onto sticker paper and post them in bathrooms.

Another consumer item that many people consider a need, but which anarchists do not, is an automobile. Even in a city like Los Angeles, a sprawling metropolis which is known for its car culture, most of the anarchists I met did not own an automobile. This was true for interviewees located in other cities as well. Even if they did have access to a car, they usually chose to commute to work, school, and other activities by bicycle. As evidence of the close relationship between bike culture and anarchist identity, several interviewees said they got into cycling as a serious mode of transportation around the same time they became politicized, even if they had ridden bicycles recreationally earlier in their lives. As Tina recalled, “I started riding a bike probably three, three and a half years ago, I think the whole radicalization happened around that time, so bike riding comes with it you know.” Branch described the link between anarchism and cycling in this way:

An important thing with anarchism is, anything can be done if you set your mind to it, and you don’t have to sort of conform to typical ways of living, or the system. And I think a large part of that is driving, and I think a large way to overcome that is through cycling, and I think it’s a much more effective way [than driving] to build community and it’s a much more effective way to act environmentally, ethically.

Although he didn't believe that cycling exhausts "what anarchism is," Branch did say that "if you're truly trying to understand and practice anarchism I think they just go hand in hand." For many anarchists, riding bicycles is a form of consumption-based resistance against the automobile-centric transportation industry and its influence on mainstream social norms around personal physical mobility.

There are, however, some circumstances in which commuting by bicycle may be impractical. To give one example, anarchists often form Food Not Bombs (FNB) organizations, which prepare large quantities of food and distribute it to homeless people and attendees at political events.² Transporting the food from the preparation site to the distribution site (e.g. from a kitchen to a public park) can pose a problem when all the activists travel by bicycle. The creative solution employed by the Downtown Los Angeles FNB group was to hook trailers up to their bicycles to get the food from the cook site (a communal household in the Silverlake neighborhood) to Skid Row (a site where homeless people congregate, located a few miles away). Activist groups and communal households may also take on shared ownership of an automobile, reserved for occasions where bicycle transit is prohibitively impractical.

This points to another means by which anarchists reduce their commercial consumption, which is sharing commodities among many people, taking advantage of economies of scale to avoid expending a lot of money on necessities. A related example is the common anarchist practice of co-habiting together in large numbers—anywhere from half a dozen to more than 20 people—a practice known as cooperative housing or collective living. By living together in groups, anarchists spend less on rent, groceries, utility bills, and other household expenditures than they would if they lived alone or in small numbers, as is the norm for mainstream middle-class Americans. An interviewee called Revbaker explained his involvement in cooperative housing (or "co-ops") this way:

I first learned of collective living after visiting a few student coops [sic] in Boulder. I was definitely impressed and heavily influenced by the whole idea. It seemed like a natural and even necessary embodiment, or manifestation, of radical politics. Something like, 'If you believe that humans can live in different ways from mainstream society, and in fact can live in ways that are counter to prevailing societal institutions (nuclear family, competition, over-consumption, coercion, etc.) then prove it.' And so we did, or are at least, we are trying.

Anarchist cooperative houses are direct descendents of hippie communes and earlier experiments with "intentional living." Like their forerunners in earlier countercultural movements, anarchist communes are meant to denaturalize the idea that people are meant to live in small, private family units and to care most for those closely related to them by blood. Intentional

living situations are also attempts to reinvent members' own class status and in the process protest the idea of class status altogether (Rossinow 1998: 249). As might be expected based on anarchists' attitudes toward personal hygiene, standards of cleanliness in these group houses are generally relaxed. Group houses often open themselves up to visiting travelers, and many host music shows or organize meetings in the house's communal space. Local activist groups such as Food Not Bombs also often utilize group houses for meetings and food preparation.

One of the most cherished principles of anarchist lifestyles is "DIY," which stands for "do-it-yourself." The idea behind DIY is that when possible one should put one's own, unalienated labor toward producing the things one needs, rather than putting money toward practices and industries that exploit workers and natural resources. Knowing how to repair things for oneself also keeps one from having either to pay others to do it or to spend money on new things to replace the old. An interviewee named Orlando explained to me that he saw bicycle commuting as an example of DIY, in that it involves using one's own physical energy to transport oneself rather than gasoline purchased from a corrupt oil corporation. Anarcho-cyclists (a term used by some anarchist bike enthusiasts) may also become versed in DIY bicycle repair, with the aid of specifically anarchist books, zines, and instruction from comrades. Politicized bicycle cultures often build institutions that foster DIY practices and operate under anarchist organizing principles. For example, the Bicycle Kitchen in Los Angeles is a non-hierarchically organized, volunteer-run workshop that exists to promote cycling as an alternative to driving, and to provide the means for cyclists to build, maintain, and repair their own bicycles using salvaged parts, rather than further contributing to capitalist patterns of waste and alienated labor.

The DIY principle can be, and is, applied to almost everything anarchists consume. For example, growing one's own food (or even hunting it, as one non-vegetarian interviewee from rural Vermont did) is a common DIY practice, as is making and mending one's own clothing. At the TOW Warehouse, a collective space in downtown Los Angeles, organizers put on regular workshops where participants share their knowledge and skills to make things that they would otherwise have to buy from corporations, such as LED bike lights or home-brewed beer. As a collective member named Tom explained to me, TOW stands for Theater of Work, which symbolizes that the space is a place to work and be productive, but for one's own benefit and not through selling one's labor to others who have the means to exploit it. The reference to theatricality could be thought, furthermore, to symbolize a commitment to performing alternatives in a visible way, so as to communicate a political message. Josef explained the activities at TOW in less abstract terms: "that's another thing we do because we're anarchists! We brew our own beer now, cuz, fuck supporting the liquor stores, and you know what, fuck liquor stores."

There are even some consumer services that most people would not think of as feasible to do for oneself, but to which many anarchists apply the DIY principle. Take, for example, the practice of DIY gynecology, which focuses on self-examination and diagnosis and herbal treatments for things like menstrual cramps, yeast infections, sexually transmitted diseases, and unwanted pregnancies. I attended a workshop on DIY gynecology at a festival co-organized by Gabby, an interviewee. In this workshop, the facilitator showed participants how to use a speculum on themselves and what to look for while doing examinations. She also encouraged frank discussion and questions from the audience, and offered medical advice on topics such as infections, masturbation, and sexual intercourse. Workshops like this are extremely common—it was my experience that several of the anarchist book fairs and conferences I attended featured a session in this vein. Zines on DIY gynecology are also ubiquitous—in addition to the one I purchased at the workshop, called *Hot Pants* (Gauthier and Vinebaum 1999), I've seen similar ones at every book fair that I've attended.

The political principle behind DIY gynecology is explained by the *Hot Pants* zine in its assertion that the practice is an attempt “to help break away from the medical establishment’s tentacular grip on our bodies and our approaches to health and healing” (Gauthier and Vinebaum 1999: 1). An interviewee named Minty said that she would rather rely on herself and her anarcho-feminist friends to take care of her physical and mental health, because their practices are “holistic and healthy and women-centered” and she won’t have to deal with a doctor “that will call me crazy anyway and give me fucked up medicine.” Raychel, another interviewee, makes her own menstrual pads because they are more comfortable and less environmentally destructive than store-bought pads. DIY approaches to menstrual products are also a way to avoid supporting “the ‘sanitary hygiene’ industry” which feeds into the patriarchal taboo on menstruation by treating it as something that needs to be hidden and sanitized in the first place (Gauthier and Vinebaum 1999). Like other DIY practices, DIY gynecology is about empowering oneself rather than handing power over to someone—be it a doctor, a pharmaceutical company, or a tampon brand—who profits by exploiting others’ needs.

In some cases, refusal of consumption or doing-it-oneself are not feasible options. In these instances, anarchists utilize what I call extra-commercial means of obtaining goods, which allows them to consume without providing financial support to capitalist corporations. One common means of doing so is to share and trade with friends. For Minty, consuming in an anarchist way is about finding alternatives to capitalist exchange within her own circle of acquaintances. She explained this using a few examples:

It’s knowing the resources that are already in the network of people that you trust and using them whether it be DIY gynecology or clothing. Like,

a lot of my friends knit, so when I'm in New York, [it's] buying their scarves and their hats and mittens, or doing like a barter versus going to like Urban Outfitters you know? So knowing what resources are in your group of friends and utilizing that versus anywhere else.

Minty thus sees her social network as an alternative to capitalist retail establishments. In this vein, Gabby also finds friends who can provide services she needs, and, in turn, she shares her own skills. She mentioned, for instance, that she was taking violin lessons from a friend and cooking meals for him in exchange.

Some anarchists have more permanently institutionalized the practice of sharing, establishing “free stores” where people can convene to donate their unwanted belongings to each other. The idea of relying on the resources of your community is also at work in events like Really Really Free Markets (RRFMs), which anarchists have organized in several cities across the United States. At RRFMs, people bring things to give away that are still usable but just not useful to them anymore. The markets are often held in public parks, and look like a cross between a yard sale and a swap meet, only there is no monetary exchange or even barter involved. At the one I attended in Los Angeles, folks spread blankets out in a corner of a municipal park, and put out old clothes, books, and other consumable items for “shoppers” to take at will. There was also a station set up for people to bring their bicycles and get free bike repair lessons. The local Food Not Bombs group provided free snacks and water. The guiding principle at RRFMs is that things are given away as “gifts” and anyone can freely take what they want without having to give anything themselves. The point is not to make money off one's old possessions—just to find them a new home as an alternative to throwing them away. And the provision of services like bike repair instruction is meant to spread knowledge for its own sake. Besides providing for people's material needs and wants, RRFMs are meant to function as demonstrations of the viability of an alternative to the neoliberal capitalist free market in which state policies and economic practices favor big business and exploit individuals in the name of corporate profits. The name of the event itself is a verbal play on the view that the “free market” does not actually (“really really”) promote freedom for most people, especially those who must sell their labor in order to earn the living wage that is required to enable them to consume in fulfillment of their needs.

Outside of structured consumption encounters like free stores or RRFMs, anarchists may also scavenge for discarded goods which are not necessarily intended to be shared or reused, but which still hold value. A common term for such scavenging is “dumpster diving” (sometimes abbreviated to “dumpstering”) owing to the fact that commercial institutions often discard perfectly usable goods in trash bins, which the plucky scavenger can climb (dive) into and root through. Dumpster diving has become something of

a refined skill among anarchists, with zines and articles written on the subject of how to most effectively and efficiently obtain the best refuse. Depending on the availability of well-stocked dumpsters in one's area, one may be able to obtain most commodities, including food, for free. Food retailers in particular often discard mass quantities of edible products for purely cosmetic reasons—the produce is marred, the boxes are crushed, or the expiration date has recently passed. In addition to being a practical strategy for finding food, clothes, appliances, and furniture, dumpstering is positioned by anarchists as an act of protest against the wastefulness of the commercial retail system, in which things that are superficially damaged or just out of fashion are thrown away, though their use value is intact.

Another means by which anarchists may attempt to obtain consumable goods without monetary expenditure is shoplifting. Obviously, this method poses a certain amount of risk to the practitioner, as it is a criminal activity. Ideologically, anarchists can justify theft as an act of legitimate property redistribution within a system that they believe to be “criminal” in a more metaphorical, moral sense. In other words, because the system of capitalist exchange enables corporations to “steal” labor and natural resources, there is nothing morally objectionable in anarchists reappropriating the products those corporations sell for profit. This logic accounts for Gabby explaining to me that she doesn't shoplift at “mom and pop” establishments, only big chain stores. Furthermore, subcultural theorist Stephen Duncombe (2008: 88) explains that as a transgression of the law, theft is a symbolic “refusal to become part of the cycle of ‘responsible’ work and consumption.”

Practices which involve the appropriation of consumer items at no monetary cost are encompassed under the umbrella designation of *freeganism*. The term “freegan” is a portmanteau of the words free and vegan, and it refers to a diet in which animal-based (non-vegan) food products may be consumed, but only if they can be obtained for free, so as not to contribute to the market demand for animal products. Joel, for example, regularly consumes dairy products if they will otherwise be discarded. I actually witnessed Joel deftly take a piece of lemon meringue pie off a vacated table at a restaurant when he saw that the diner had left it untouched and was told by the server that it would be thrown away. Because he was not paying for the pie, he did not see himself as financially supporting the producers or distributors of the eggs and dairy that had gone into making it, thus he did not see himself as contributing to the economic demand for animal products. Freegans register their critique of consumer capitalism and its attendant hierarchies not by abstaining from consumption, but by abstaining from *paying for* their consumption. They also see themselves as extracting material value from the system without putting value back in, thus weakening the system in a small way. The freegan lifestyle may extend beyond dietary practices to encompass a holistic orientation toward not making a financial contribution to the offenders in the capitalist system.

Perhaps the mode of anarchist anti-consumption least identifiable as such is the patronage of anarchist businesses. Anarchist businesses—seemingly self-contradictory entities in the eyes of some—explicitly identify themselves as anarchist and run themselves according to anarchist organizing principles. The practice of purchasing commodities from an anarchist business is obviously an act of consumption. Yet, we can analyze it as anti-consumption, since such purchases are made with a conscious intention *not* to purchase from a more conventional capitalist institution. Generally, anarchist businesses do not exist to turn a profit through the sale of commodities (they may even have non-profit status with the US Internal Revenue Service). Rather, their mission is to provide consumers with products that are not always readily available in the mainstream market, such as fair-trade coffee, vegan food, and radical literature. Furthermore, they usually try to put value back into the local radical community by sponsoring activist efforts. Some anarchist businesses are transient, only setting up shop at events like book fairs and festivals. Others have a permanent physical space—often a storefront or residence—which they also make available for organizing meetings and traveling presenters. These spaces are sometimes called “infoshops” because they generally keep a stock of political books and zines for local community members to borrow or purchase. They may also provide public computers and internet access or host public events. Joel Olson (2009: 40) describes the anarchist infoshop as “a space where people can learn about radical ideas, where radicals can meet other radicals, and where political work (such as meetings, public forums, fundraisers, etc.) can get done.” Some paradigmatic examples of institutions like this are the Wooden Shoe in Philadelphia and Red Emma’s in Baltimore.

Another anarchist business enterprise, AK Press, is a publishing outfit that prints and distributes books and other media on topics of interest to radicals. AK’s self-stated goal is “supplying radical words and images to as many people as possible” (AK Press, n.d.). The press runs a website and print catalog, and is a ubiquitous presence at anarchist book fairs; every book fair I’ve attended has had a large AK Press table with hundreds of books as well as shirts and other items for sale. Based in the San Francisco Bay area, AK also runs a warehouse in Oakland that hosts organizing and social events, particularly near the time of the annual Bay Area Anarchist Book Fair held in nearby San Francisco. Like the Wooden Shoe and Red Emma’s, AK is run by a collective of its workers, who democratically decide which titles to carry as well as how to divide the labor of the press. The collective management structure is, in all these cases, an attempt to resist replicating the worst practices of capitalist businesses, even while participating in the commodity marketplace.

AK’s mission illustrates a point made by cultural studies scholar Jeremy Gilbert (2008: 108) in his book *Anticapitalism and Culture*, which is that commodification is not equivalent to capitalism. It is theoretically

possible to embrace the communicative potential of commodification without advocating an exploitative system based on the principle of the maximization of capital. Businesses like AK Press are aware that they are inevitable participants in the capitalist system:

like it or not, capitalism is the only game in town at the moment. The paper that books are printed on, the building we work in, the packages we send and receive, the computers we use—all are the result of the exploited labor of the working class. Until we take power away from private economic tyrannies like corporations and investment groups, until we're in control of our creative energies, almost every good or service we use or provide is administered by capitalism. (AK Press, n.d.)

However, the collective that runs AK also points out that the press “doesn’t exist to enrich its members at the expense of consumers.” Instead, they use commodification as a means of providing what they call “tools for intellectual self-defense.” As proudly self-proclaimed “propagandists,” AK is a business that channels commercial exchange toward the spread of revolutionary ideas. All of these businesses arguably use consumption relations as an infrastructure upon which can be overlaid other processes that are important to anarchism as an activist political movement; processes such as the circulation of discourse, the performance of identity, and the sustenance of community. Anarchist businesses use discourse to position their enterprises as oppositional to capitalism and contributory to the anarchist project of revolution. In this way, the practice of working or shopping at an anarchist business is of a piece with the other anti-consumption practices described above.

Although lifestyle and consumer politics are often thought of as individualistic in nature, many of the examples described above point to the importance of community for political anti-consumption. Communal housing obviously cannot be undertaken by one person; nor can RRFMs or free stores. Other anarchist anti-consumption practices are greatly facilitated by a network of informed and skilled people who can share their knowledge and experience with new adopters. Caring for one’s gynecological health with DIY examinations and remedies is a daunting prospect without the help of people who are qualified to hold workshops and author pamphlets in which they pass along their expertise. In some cases, DIY lifestyle practices are only cost-effective if the tools for making and repairing things oneself can be shared across many individuals. Cycling, for instance, can require prohibitive amounts of financial and knowledge capital if attempted by an isolated individual. In extolling the virtues of having an anarchist community around him, interviewee Branch commented that, “when you have a local bicycle workshop it becomes much cheaper and easier to maintain a bicycle and learn how to keep things running.” In this capacity, the Bicycle Kitchen

in Los Angeles (and collectives like it in many other cities) is indispensable for those who practice their anarchist politics through cycling.

Where the anarchist lifestyle calls for the consumption of alternative products, a relatively large number of people with similar needs and preferences is needed to sustain demand for any given commodity. For example, for fair-trade coffee to be a viable consumer option for any one person depends on there being enough people who demand it to generate enough revenue to sustain the workers involved in fair-trade production. Furthermore, in the absence of systemic support, many individuals may find individual resistance a practical impossibility. Alyssa was an interviewee who had moved to a small Canadian town after having lived in Northern California for many years. She explained that many of the anti-consumption practices she had engaged in while living in Santa Cruz (a California college town known for its progressive community), such as dumpstering and participating in a bicycle collective, were simply not feasible in her new location. So, while she still stuck to a vegan diet and commuted by bicycle, “so many of those things were available to me in the culture of Santa Cruz, and really aren’t here (the dumpsters are locked, there are no collective spaces like the Bike Church or Free Radio, etc).” Each of these examples reminds us that lifestyle and consumption practices are social productions, and must be analyzed as such.

Typology of anti-consumption motivations

It would be easy to see anti-consumption as a purely negative phenomenon, a practice constituted only by what is *not* done. The writer of the *Why Freeganism* zine remarks, “I couldn’t really justify buying anything, I couldn’t get behind any aspect of the corporate death consumer machine so I decided to boycott everything” (koala!, n.d.: 4). One might be tempted to see the image of “boycotting everything” in an attempt to escape “the corporate death consumer machine” as a bleak one. But as I have shown above, anti-consumption lifestyles are actually rich with practices and meanings of their own. Also, the consequences of anti-consumption cannot be reduced simply to the market impact of not buying—there is a range of motivations to be found among anarchist anti-consumers, including personal gratification, moral rectitude, activist intervention, identificatory performance, and social communication.

I use the term “motivations” cautiously, since individual anti-consumers are not always highly conscious of and striving toward the outcomes I enumerate below. Rather, anti-consumption practices are social objects, in the sense that they represent the collective work of innumerable individual subjects and thus take on a cultural meaning that exceeds the consciousness or experience of any specific actor. While I have framed my analysis in terms

of motivations, I could have framed it in terms of consequences or effects. The decision to frame my analysis in terms of motivations rather than consequences or effects was, in part, a matter of convenience and method. It is easier to observe and document the stated intentions behind practices than it is to reliably assess whether anti-consumption practices actually achieve their intended effects. Hypothetically, the analytic typology I elaborate *could* be used to evaluate outcomes in addition to intentions, an idea which I will also discuss further below. The typology I offer makes analytical distinctions between several different kinds of goals that might motivate anti-consumption behavior. These goals may overlap in the real world, and they are often not clearly demarcated in the minds of practitioners—that is, multiple motivations may converge in the same behavior.³ I will discuss the real-world overlaps further below, but for now I will present the typology in terms of pure categories, in the interest of analytical clarity.

Personal motivations for anti-consumption practices have to do with finding immediate personal benefit in these alternative consumption experiences—what Binkley (2008: 601) refers to as “individualistic anti-consumerism.” In short, personal motivations for consumption or non-consumption seek the betterment of one’s own situation. Many anarchists believe that capitalist entities will try to exploit and alienate them through consumerism, and so they try to thwart these effects on themselves by abstaining from commercial consumption as much as possible. Anti-capitalists argue that capitalism retains its power by “integrating” consumers into the system of wage labor, keeping them docile and foreclosing the development of a “revolutionary consciousness” (Marcuse 1972: 14). By rejecting commercial consumption, anarchists reduce their own incentive to earn money, thus releasing themselves as much as possible from the intrinsically exploitative conditions of wage labor. Expressions like this one (from the zine I referenced above)—“You don’t have to compromise yourself and your humanity to the evil demon of wage-slavery!” (koala!, n.d.: 2)—are not uncommon in contemporary anarchist discourse. The zine goes on to say, “Working sucks and if a little scavenging can keep you from needing a job than [sic] go jump in a dumpster!” (3). Consumption habits such as dumpstering are thus offered as a solution to the problem of the alienation that comes of “working long hours at a dehumanizing job” (2).

Along similar lines, Emily explained one of her reasons for getting around by bicycle and public transit, instead of owning her own car, “I also don’t like to work that much . . . and if you don’t have a car, you don’t have to work as much, because you don’t have to pay for a car. Cars cost a lot of money—I think people don’t realize how much they cost because I don’t think people sit back and look at it.” Here, Emily demonstrated that she had thought critically about exactly what was involved in participating in a consumption practice most people take for granted. For her, like many anarchists, owning a car is not an automatic fact of life, it is an intentional

activity which involves real trade-offs in terms of time and money, which could be spent otherwise. While most of the anarchists I spoke with did hold some kind of job in order to maintain a baseline income, they were still able to work less than they would have had they been trying to earn enough money to consume at mainstream levels.

Anarchists also understand their conscious rejection of consumerism as a means of resistance against being personally ideologically manipulated. In other words, they attempt not to succumb to the “false needs” imposed by dominant consumerist ideology, and as a result, they see themselves as being able to lead more enjoyable, liberated lives. Josef alluded to the personal benefits that come from actively rejecting the standards of mainstream culture: “I’m not gonna subscribe to all that shit because it’s just gonna make me depressed anyway, cuz I don’t look like Cindy Crawford and I wouldn’t want to be Brad Pitt anyways!” Joel expressed his feeling that “it makes you a more interesting person” when you “diverge a little bit from the mainstream.” He brought this up in the context of talking about how being a vegan has forced him to try different kinds of cuisine than he might have, had his diet been more conventional.

Branch said that he made a habit of seeking news and entertainment from independent media producers, like Indymedia, an electronic network in which independent individuals and organizations can directly upload news stories for public consumption. To him, alternative media outlets were a “much more informative and reliable form of information, of what’s going on, as opposed to a commercial network, television news and things like that, where they are influenced by media companies, by government.” In Branch’s view, his practice of not consuming mainstream media allowed him to liberate himself (at least somewhat) from dependence on sources of information he saw as untrustworthy.

Moral anti-consumption describes practices that are motivated by judgments about right and wrong. Here, acting morally is about being able to live with oneself, about holding oneself personally accountable for living consistently with one’s values, and with feeling personally responsible for the concrete impacts one’s consumption has on others. The “others” in these cases may include animals, the environment, and/or exploited laborers. Moral anti-consumption is “a case of integrity” (Newholm 2005: 114). Anti-consumption practices are construed as moral in that, by reducing one’s demand for goods produced under objectionable conditions, one reduces one’s complicity with the system or entities that perpetuate those conditions. To give a basic example, several interviewees said they made a point of wearing used clothing so as to avoid personally contributing money to companies that employ sweatshop labor. Furthermore, by establishing a regular lifestyle habit of not consuming new clothes, anti-consumers attempt to remove themselves from a global economic circuit in which clothing manufacturers tend to locate their production in places with lax

labor regulations, the result being exploitative conditions across the clothing industry. By not participating in the consumption of new clothes, anti-consumers can feel they have acted with integrity in the face of widespread corporate immorality.

Veganism too is frequently understood as a moral practice. Joel explained that he believes human dominance over animals is unjustifiable in moral terms. For Joel, to eat meat or wear leather shoes would be to personally benefit from the industrialization of that dominance, and thus those acts of consumption on his part would be illegitimate exercises of human power. In Joel's words, coming to that belief made it "so easy for me to be vegan." The way he put it, veganism was for him less about an emotional connection to animal suffering and more about an ethical objection to the ways in which humans attempt to use ideology (about human superiority) to legitimize an illegitimate exercise of power. Although another interviewee, Josef, said he respected other people's decision not to be vegan, he went on to point out an ethical consistency between anarchism and certain forms of consumption: "just do whatever the fuck you want, but don't be, like, promoting what you're trying to fight against. Like, if you're, if you're an anarchist but you're like, gonna go eat at McDonalds, you gotta check yourself right there, you know?" For Josef, acting morally means subjecting oneself to "checks" to ensure that one is not violating one's own political commitments.

Activist motivations for anti-consumption go beyond adopting a practice because it is morally right in itself. Activist anti-consumption is done in order to put pressure on a system or larger entity to *alter a pattern* of immoral practice. Whether a practice has activist motivations or not depends on whether the practitioners are attempting to use their actions to effect a change in current conditions. For anarchists, activist consumption often involves attempts to leverage personal finances toward subverting or correcting the objectionable aspects of the entire capitalist system. Craig O'Hara's *The Philosophy of Punk* (1999: 131) expresses this view: "One of the best ways to *refuse and resist a destructive capitalist system* is to vote economically, spending dough where you feel it has the least harmful effect" (emphasis mine).⁴ Anti-consumption which occurs under the aegis of a strike or boycott falls into this category.⁵ The reasoning behind activist anti-consumption is that if enough individuals withdraw their resources from the system of corporate capitalism, that system will eventually "have a real battle on its hands," in the words of one commenter on an anarchist email list I followed.

As an example of activist consumption, many interviewees said that they try to buy from local or independent businesses (including the specific ones mentioned above). Matthew, a professor living in a small college town in Texas, offered his book-buying practices as an instance of this habit:

I prefer to buy books secondhand. When I lived in Chicago and Philadelphia, I bought as many books as possible this way. If I couldn't

get them from a shop I'd buy them online. Now that I live in a town that doesn't have a single independently-owned bookstore, I get nearly all my books online. For newer books, I'll usually try to abuse my academic privileges and ask for review copies first. Anything to beat the media conglomerates, though obviously the smaller presses are fine!

Matthew's habit of avoiding corporate chain stores in order to "beat the media conglomerates" could be understood as a kind of boycott or consumer strike. His coinciding habit of patronizing second-hand and independent bookshops could be understood as a "buycott," which takes up "an oppositional or 'anti' product that is promoted as the alternative to a brand that is being avoided for reasons of wider social purpose" (Littler 2009: 35). Matthew's patronage of alternative booksellers is not part of any specific consumer activist campaign. Yet, the fact that it is, for him, connected to his political identification with anarchism means that he can envision his consumer practices as collective, since many other anarchists are engaged in similar practices. The fact that such actions are discursively promoted as part of the culture of anarchist movements means that they are not really isolated personal acts, but rather "individualized collective action" (Micheletti 2003: xi). Because anarchist individuals are aware that there are very many of them adopting similar lifestyles, they can see themselves as contributing to a project that makes a measurable impact.

Activist anti-consumption may also entail a communicative motivation, as a kind of propaganda by the deed or prefigurative politics (as discussed in the introductory chapter). The communicative logic of prefigurative politics rests on implicit assumptions about the capacity of small-scale actions to work as theatrical spectacles which publicly represent political ideologies and convince others of their correctness. In this way, lifestyle practices are seen as rhetorical acts with the capacity to persuade and inspire others. Recall Revbaker's comment above, about collective housing being a means of "proving" the legitimacy of anarchist alternatives to consumerist society. Emily also expressed that she felt it was important for anarchists to show that their way of life "actually work[s]," that "it's a viable model" for a more just society.

Identificatory motivations for anti-consumption can be detected from the fact that many of the practices I discussed above (e.g. veganism and bicycling) are adopted alongside the assumption of an anarchist identity. This supports the idea that politicized subjects call on anti-consumption practices for their performative value. In other words, these practices are important in part because they are rituals that establish the practitioner as a certain kind of (politicized) person (Goffman 1959). The performative dimensions of consumption (and by implication, anti-consumption) are discussed by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) in his exploration of "life politics." As Giddens explains, "A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual

embraces, not only because such practices satisfy utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” (81). In the case of anarchist anti-consumers, practices of refusal, DIY, and the like, are material expressions of what it means to be an anarchist. Constructing such an identity narrative is both an individual and a collective process. That is, performances of self are both intrasubjective and intersubjective: the performance is done for oneself and also for others. Material performances of anti-consumption, in this capacity, become a Foucaultian “technology of the self” (Foucault 1988b), a dramatization of political commitment that constitutes the performer as a particular kind of subject.

Emily described her transition into vegetarianism, as a teenager, in such terms:

I was also really into imagining myself in certain ways and I wanted to imagine myself as the kind of person I wanted to be—you know, when I grew up—and I kind of figured that the kind of person I wanted to be would be a vegetarian, you know? I guess I just sort of figured it went along with the lifestyle.

Josef expressed a similar sentiment, a bit more succinctly: “I’m vegan because I think that’s what real anarchists should be.” Josef’s offhand invocation of authenticity is telling. The rhetorical figure of the “real” anarchist is a powerful one that features largely in the internal discourse of anarchist movements. It is unsurprising then that those who wish to be identified as anarchists would be motivated to orient their behaviors toward those habits which are most commonly accepted by their peers, and themselves, as authentically anarchist. This discourse of authenticity also causes individuals to feel pride and shame associated with their consumption habits, depending on the degree to which they recognize those habits as being consistent with an acceptable narrative of activist identity (Giddens 1991). Sally observed that norms of food consumption could bring about “this weird kind of pressure and guilt and I don’t know, this moral righteousness from some people.” Others I interviewed expressed feelings of guilt as well over things such as using beauty products, owning an iPod, and using a car, because of the sense that “actual” (Orlando’s word) anarchists do not do those things.

Social motivations for anti-consumption come into play when performances like those just described are used as a means of achieving solidarity among participants in anarchist movements. Beyond establishing one’s own identity, one may also use cultural practices to unite one with others who share similar political goals, and to differentiate one from those who don’t (Taylor and Whittier 1992: 111). Where consumption practices are performed publicly, particularly where they take place in “alternative” spaces, as they often do for anarchists, they may be quite meaningful in the establishing of a community of anarchist consumers. Individual habits may

reinforce one's affinity to an imagined community of fellow anti-consumers, in much the same way that consumers of the same product or brand cultivate a sense of community (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). The difference is that while mainstream consumption communities unite around meanings they share with marketers and the dominant culture, anarchist anti-consumers unite around their symbolic rejection of mainstream consumption. Anti-consumption may even spur more social cohesion than shared consumption practices do, due to its association with radical resistance to mainstream ideologies and mores (Kozinets and Handelman 2004).

By cultivating particular lifestyle practices as a community, anarchists are engaged in what I call *conspicuous anti-consumption*. Thorstein Veblen's (1994) concept of conspicuous consumption sought to explain how wealthy Americans established their identities as elites through their visibly sumptuous consumption habits and leisure activities. Although Veblen was concerned with the role of goods in the communication of economic status, the notion of conspicuous consumption can also be applied to the practices of contemporary consumers, who are more likely to define themselves in terms of cultural identity rather than economic class. This means that, while income levels still structure the consumption options available to particular individuals, the variety of commodities available at all price points allow for people to establish any manner of cultural identities based on the goods they appropriate and the style in which they appropriate them.⁶

Commodities are important vectors for the communication of identity in public life. While goods may fulfill material needs for individuals, they also carry social meanings, as objects of "collective appropriation, within relations of solidarity with and distinction from others" (Canclini 2001: 46; see also Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Matthew's explanation of his decision to throw away his television set resonates with these ideas. Matthew told me that he hated television and had thrown his set away around the time of his becoming politicized in the 1990s. He later explained that he and his fellow activists were influenced by cultural critics Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, as well as Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, and objected to television on the basis that it is a tool of capitalist control. He went on to note that no one he knew was really afraid that their television would brainwash them, but for them, "the rejection of TV . . . was more symbolic than anything else." The fact that others were engaged in similar performances of disgust with the culture industry and its products was crucial for Matthew; he reflected, "I'd like to chalk it up to deep-seated conviction but in 1999 it was just the hip thing to do, at least in the anti-globalization movement. In all honesty I was just going with the flow!"

Often, people are rewarded for "going with the flow" through the conferral of *cultural capital*, a concept developed by Bourdieu (1984) to refer to the status that accrues to individuals who possess certain tastes and habits which are valued in a particular social context. Sarah Thornton's

(1996) repurposing of this concept as “subcultural capital” is usefully applied to those instances in which individuals accrue social status in the anarchist milieu based on the extent to which their tastes deviate from the mainstream and conform to anarchist norms (the notion of “anarchist norms” may seem like a contradiction in terms—this contradiction will be explored in depth in subsequent chapters, particularly Chapter 4).

What distinguishes the normative tastes of political movements from those of other subcultures is their basis in explicit political critique. All subcultures are engaged in struggles for power, and might thus be thought of as political, but anarchists are somewhat unique in that they quite self-consciously define their subcultural identity by a collective vision for social change. This is clear from the way that most of the practices discussed here are positioned by their practitioners as expressions of political philosophy. For instance, Josef told me, “I wouldn’t want to cipher or hang out with somebody who is like, like really obsessed with the Beyoncé dance routines so they can impress people at a club, like that to me is kinda lame.” At first this seems to be a simple taste distinction, but he quickly positioned his tastes in terms of his political project, elaborating with, “what I’m trying to say is I wouldn’t want to like surround myself with, you know, people who watch football games and drink Budweiser and go to strip joints or whatever, who contribute to the violence, you know.” Importantly, Josef claimed that he doesn’t want to hang out with people who do these things not just because he happens not to like the activities, but because he sees the activities as, in themselves, “contributing to the violence” of the capitalist, hierarchical society to which he positions himself in opposition.

“Aesthetic revisioning” is a concept that captures the impact that politicization can have on individual tastes (Soper 2008). The idea is that, as individuals come to radical political consciousness, their tastes change accordingly. “Persons or objects or behaviours or practices that were formerly erotically seductive or aesthetically compelling yield their enchantment to others that previously held little of those attractions” (Soper 2008: 580). So, for example, Matthew’s taste for television was “revisioned” due to his politicization and simultaneous immersion in a subcultural community in which a rejection of mainstream media was the norm. The multiple aspects of Matthew’s decision to throw away his television show the complex intersection of motivations behind anti-consumption practices—the personal hatred he felt toward television was inextricably bound up with his activist critique of the culture industry and his tendency to “go with the flow” of the social movement with which he identified.

The anarchist businesses described above also concretely illustrate how consumption can become a collective activity, with the physical venues of consumption serving as hubs around which social networks can be forged. Places like these, along with places like group houses and bicycle workshops, provide the physical materials necessary for maintaining aspects of anarchist

lifestyle, while also bringing people together and enabling them to learn from each other about various lifestyle practices and how to implement them. Branch said that, for him, one of the most important aspects of shared housing was that it had given him opportunities to meet people who taught him about things like bicycle repair and vegan cooking. The fact that his group house was seen as an accessible space for community projects and political organizing meant that there was a “flow of people and information constantly coming through the house.” Joel had a similar experience with collective housing. In one of his houses in particular, he remembered “always hav[ing] these people coming in, [who had] really interesting politics, really interesting experiences, staying there, coming to parties.” For Joel’s anarchist community, the social space of the house facilitated interactions and relationships upon which a political network could be built and sustained.

While the social aspects of these spaces of consumption may not be conscious motivating factors at first—an individual may wander into an infoshop simply looking for a book—consumption-related practices are often a point of entry into the larger world of radical political movements. Jerome, an interviewee from Philadelphia, didn’t know much about anarchism until he started shopping for books at The Wooden Shoe. He told me about how one of his friends had taken him there when he was a teenager, and he “absolutely loved it.” He explained that it made him feel like there was a place where people understood his political views and could help him make sense of them: “I felt like I was home after thinking I was nuts for a long time.” When he had the opportunity to become a volunteer there, Jerome found himself, “quickly thrown into a world that was really eye-opening to me. Interacting with customer[s] and staff was something that put me into an entirely different way of thinking.” He told me that his experience at “the Shoe” (as he called it) brought him into contact with anarchists for the first time (apart from seeing them at punk shows) and made him aware that an anarchist community existed. After a few months, he started identifying as an anarchist himself, and he still did over a decade later and was still a committed volunteer at the Shoe.

Jerome was already aligned with leftist politics when he got involved with anarchism through the Shoe. In other instances, consumption may start out as an apolitical activity, generating feelings of identification with a community, feelings which are later utilized as a foundation for political organizing. The consumption of punk music, for instance, is a common factor in many anarchists’ introduction to radical political ideologies and organizing efforts. Many interviewees explicitly named punk artists and zines as the source of their first exposure to anarchist ideas. Several more referred to their participation in punk scenes as bringing them into contact with individuals whose political beliefs they found compelling. Listening to records, circulating zines, and attending punk shows are all consumption activities which may start out as a product of aesthetic preferences and end up producing political subjectivity and social networks, as consumers

communicate and identify with each other, both remotely and in person, both in “imagined” (Anderson 1991) and in material senses.

Applying the typology

As other studies before this one have shown, any specific instance of anti-consumption is likely to be motivated by multiple goals, with varying degrees of consciousness on the part of the actor. One goal may even “over-determine” others (Soper 2007: 212); for example, if one’s identity is defined by the extent to which one acts in a moral manner, the moral and identificatory motivations will be practically inseparable (Barnett et al. 2005). Practices of anti-consumption may also have multiple outcomes, independent of the motivations of the practitioners. It is important to sketch out the multiple dimensions of political lifestyle practices, both to see how they may work to constitute each other, and to identify potential points of contradiction. The multiple, and potentially contradictory, outcomes of anarchists’ consumption practices may bear on judgments about the appropriateness of lifestyle politics within movement strategy.⁷

Leo was one interviewee who had at one time been enthusiastic about typically anarchist lifestyle practices like veganism and bicycling, but he had since abandoned them. Unlike many of my other interviewees, Leo did not look particularly like an anarchist: he wore a clean, loose-fitting button-down shirt, had no visible tattoos or piercings, and arrived to our interview driving a car. He was 32 years old, working in a hospital, and attending community college. He described himself as the child of a Salvadorean communist, and was raising a young daughter of his own. When I asked Leo why he had given up many of the typical anarchist consumption practices, he said that one reason was that, “I guess I thought that maybe the position of struggle might be somewhere else. That that wasn’t even a struggle?” He also pointed out that a lot of the lifestyle practices adopted by self-identified radicals, like gardening and bicycling, might seem appealingly “revolutionary” but that ultimately those choices don’t radically subvert the state or the capitalist economy. In part, this realization came about for him due to the ease with which corporate brands were able to integrate his lifestyle choices into their profit models. By way of example, Leo voiced his distaste for Whole Foods consumers and his frustration at seeing, “my desires and my moral position, ethical position, be so co-opted into a whole other kind of consumer class.” Although he had at one time felt good about his ethical consumption practices, he stopped feeling so good when he realized that he shared many of them with people whose politics and social position he didn’t share.

Frustration like Leo’s is ostensibly fueled by the fear that commercial co-optation necessarily implies a draining of dissenting ideological content, and thus causes the defusion of oppositional potential. That is, when a taste is

catered to, even if that taste was originally based in ethical commitments, it may only retain a superficial connection to oppositional values. Some fear that anarchist political critique is actively defused when it is expressed through individual consumer practices. Of particular concern is the potential for the reincorporation of anti-capitalists back into the capitalist marketplace as consumers through *commercial* appeals to political dissatisfaction. The incorporation of oppositional symbols and their consumers into the marketplace means that they will probably become implicated in capitalist exploitation at some point in the supply chain. To be sure, commodification is a material process and, within conditions of mass production, it usually entails exploitation of people and the environment. Rosemary Hennessey argues that when commodities become meaningful for identity or politics, this accretion of meaning only furthers what Karl Marx refers to as the fetishism of the commodity (Hennessey 1994–95; Marx 1978). According to arguments like Hennessey's, capitalism is deplorably strengthened by this renewed demand for commodities. Some take the position that if a practice or style is co-optable by the market or compatible with state policy, then it *must* not be radical (and maybe never was), and by extension should not be supported by authentic anarchists. For some anarchists, the risk of co-optation is enough to render lifestyle politics untenable as part of anarchist strategy. Others are less resigned; as one participant in an online debate over lifestyle anarchism remarked, "it's been said that capitalism can co-opt lifestyles etc . . . so what, we just stick with the shit they offer us in the first place? I'd rather run the risk of being eventually co-opted than starting at the place the capitalists want me to start."

The typology offered above can help to illuminate what was at stake for Leo when his lifestyle practices were co-opted by the Whole Foods consumer class. The *personal* and *moral* outcomes of Leo's consumption habits were ostensibly unchanged, yet the *identificatory* and *social* ramifications were shifted as a result of the mainstreaming of his habits. Leo also saw the *activist* potential of his practices as being defused through their co-optation by the Whole Foods corporation, since his motivation had initially been to subvert capitalism itself. Indeed, this example demonstrates that certain personal and moral orientations may be quite compatible with capitalism, provided corporations are willing to adapt to "alternative" preferences (and they usually are). Individual practices of veganism, for instance, are not *intrinsically* incompatible with capitalism, as has been shown by the burgeoning niche market for vegan food and other consumables. Yet, just because vegan consumers have been targeted by capitalist corporations doesn't mean that the moral justifications for veganism held by those consumers are eviscerated. Gardening and biking may not be intrinsically anti-capitalist if capitalist enterprises can find a way to exploit the demand for them, but certainly there are other benefits to these practices. The analytical separation I advocate is important here, because it allows for a critical assessment of lifestyle politics even in light of corporate co-optation.

It is true that commercialism can diffuse anarchist styles and practices beyond a bounded subcultural milieu. Although conventional wisdom among anti-capitalists has it that once a political subculture is integrated into the commercial market, it necessarily loses its subversive power, we might also see something positive in popular culture's capacity to facilitate a certain kind of democratic accessibility to dissenting political discourses. Because there are both political and apolitical attractions to cycling, veganism, and other lifestyle practices, it may be that people who get drawn into consumption communities around these practices become exposed to people who do have political reasons for participating in them. For instance, a collective institution like a café which makes itself welcoming to its local community regardless of political orientation may find that people who don't know anything about worker self-management (a key component of anarchist businesses) become interested in the political philosophies behind this organizing principle once they see it in action. Commercial exchange thus enables the diffusion of anarchist ideals to a broader audience than those who might be predisposed to seek out radical political discourse. For many people like the individuals I interviewed, an interest and involvement in anarchism ends up extending beyond just listening to punk music or reading CrimethInc. books or wearing circle-A patches, though these subcultural consumption habits serve as an initial introduction to anarchist ideas. Even if more deeply engaged people like these interviewees are the minority among consumers of "anarchist" merchandise, it's not the case that commercial exposure necessarily *precludes* political activism in other forms. Even in the case of corporate co-optation, the picture is not unequivocally bleak. As Jeremy Gilbert (2008) argues, even while capitalism may try to exploit the creative products of bohemian subcultures, even anti-capitalist ones, it cannot fully control those products or the way they are used by consumers.

The analysis of anarchist book fairs offers another example of how being attentive to the multiple effects of consumption as a cultural practice can be helpful. Whenever an anarchist book fair is held, people both within and outside of the anarchist community are quick to point out that vendors selling literature to crowds of anarchists is not exactly an overturning of capitalism. For instance, in a *Los Angeles Times* article about the 2010 Los Angeles Anarchist Book Fair, an attendee at the event was quoted as saying, ruefully, "We don't fight here. We hold book fairs" (Linthicum 2010). The journalist who authored the article attributed this attendee with the belief that the "event itself proved the need for revolution." The underlying assumption here is that book fairs and other activities that revolve around consumption are taking away time and effort that could be devoted to "fighting." This is a kind of all-or-nothing logic that doesn't really allow for the reality that lifestyle politics is not the only form of politics in which people are engaged. When that same *Los Angeles Times* article circulated on Los Angeles Anarchist email listserv, one person responded, "lol [laughing

out loud] at ‘People don’t fight here. They hold book fairs.’ some truth to that, we fight though, just not at book fairs I guess.” This response reveals that while it may be true that some people participate in book fairs to the exclusion of other political activities, one does not *necessarily* exclude the other. Book fairs coexist with other forms of activism that look more like “fighting.” The people who organize anarchist book fairs rarely intend them to substitute for other forms of political engagement. Book fairs also serve functions other than direct activism. They are fun and personally enjoyable to activists, they provide a space where activists’ identities as anarchists can be openly performed and validated, and they are an opportunity for social togetherness and network building. Furthermore, if we consider the communicative potential of an event like a book fair, we could see it as having activist dimensions. Book fairs are large, public events that require collective effort and organization. By demonstrating that anarchists are capable of such things, book fairs may persuade skeptics that anarchy is not synonymous with chaos and violence and instead offers many more wholesome values, such as mutual aid and community.

To offer another concrete example, the organizers of an anarchist event held in downtown Los Angeles in 2009 were targets of criticism on the basis that their event was too oriented toward lifestyle and consumption activities. The event, called an “Anarchist Café” by its organizers, was declared “a bust” by one anonymous critic who posted a review to a blog called *The LA Anarchist Weekly*. In the review, the café attendee criticized the fact that the event was too focused on “subcultural” aspects of anarchism like vegan nutrition; the attendee also found it objectionable that there was an admission charge in addition to vendors selling books and shirts. The reviewer’s damning conclusion: “The Downtown LA Anarchist Cafe = anarchist (as in vegan, trendy, hipster) identity for SALE. Epic Fail.” Yet, the organizers were aware of the multiplicity of motivations potentially involved in such an event. They responded to the criticism by saying that that particular event “was not about bring on a Revolution or lets over throw [sic].” On a local listserv, another commenter argued that the purpose of every event does not need to be to stage revolution, saying, “These types of events should be enjoyed as social decompressors, spaces which are provided for, hopefully, activist and anarchist networking. But they are in no way a substitute or alternative for actual community organizing & movement building which we are ALL responsible for.” Comments like these show that practices of lifestyle politics are meant to serve multiple functions beyond their activist effects, and not all of these functions are necessarily aimed at revolutionary social change. Anti-consumption practices are fruitfully understood as a set of rituals through which anarchists accomplish many things, not least of which is the reproduction of themselves as a resistant subculture.

An understanding that practices may fulfill different goals to different degrees allows for flexibility and adaptability rather than wholesale

condemnation or celebration of a given tactic. Anti-consumption clearly “does” things other than effect sweeping social change—it performs identity, it builds culture, and so on. Along the way, it may shore up new forms of distinction—social divisions based on taste (Bourdieu 1984)—that prevent anarchists from reaching people outside their subculture and even pit them against each other in struggles over authenticity. The fact that individual practices are accorded such political significance within activist discourses encourages people to be all the more invested in distinguishing themselves from those who make different choices. The rhetorical construction and defense of these distinctions may take a moralistic tone, claiming superiority for certain lifestyles and shutting down productive discussion about the tactical benefits of specific consumption practices (see Littler 2009). This is just one reason why it’s useful to maintain an analytical separation between multiple motivations and potential outcomes of politicized lifestyle practices. If one is interested in evaluating lifestyle practices as political *tactics*, one needs to know what they are trying to accomplish and whether they are actually accomplishing these things. While one motivation may be legitimately served by an individual’s consumption activity, other goals may be less effectively realized. It is up to the actors in any particular situation to debate and decide (as the organizers and attendees of the Anarchist Café did) whether a given tactic is appropriate in that context.

Becoming highly conscious of the many potential motivations and effects of anti-consumption can also help activists not to fetishize anti-consumption as a tactic, not to conflate its satisfaction of personal fulfillment with its fulfillment of the promise of social change, for example. In fact, it is strategically useful to be able to recognize when anti-consumption fulfills one goal and works *against* another. To go back to the anecdote with which this chapter began, had Raychel not purchased the burrito with cheese in it, she may have fulfilled the identificatory goal of performing pure veganism, but she would have sacrificed the moral imperative she felt to feed the man who was hungry. The ultimate implication of an analysis that identifies multiple and potentially contradictory motivations or outcomes for lifestyle practices is that it’s self-defeating for activists to be “puristic” or “black and white” (as Joel put it) about any specific practice. As Grant pointed out, “When you attempt to create a hierarchy of personal purchase choices it will ultimately fall to pieces when put under any type of scrutiny.” What this chapter suggests is not that all consumption practices are equal or that scrutiny should be avoided, but rather that a careful, contextual scrutiny might be adopted, in which the conditions of the situation are taken into account and the immediate goals are decided upon and clearly communicated so that tactics can be assessed accordingly. This principle can be applied to any practice of lifestyle politics, in order to determine whether it should be pulled out of the activist toolkit in any specific circumstance.