Expired Europe: Consumption, Waste and Crisis in Spain

I. Our canvas, “shopping” cart is overflowing with produce - lettuce, onions, eggplant, apples - freshly rinsed, and still dripping water on the cobblestones. The best dumpster in the neighborhood is a 10 minute walk, but it takes us past a fountain where we can clean up our haul before bringing it inside. By the time it gets back to the house, everything’s been checked over and washed off. Bruised is okay, but not moldy. Leave some for other people. Don’t take too much of the same thing. We *don’t* need any more radishes... As we near the house, one of our neighbors, the vendor of a produce store waves us over. He often says hi, and sometimes sees us looking through his garbage for food that can still be eaten. Smiling, he hands us a few packages of mushrooms. They’re about to go bad and it’s a shame to throw them away. We agree. We invite him for dinner on Thursday. He thanks us for the invitation, but I get the impression we won’t be seeing him. When we get back to the house we dry and sort the food. We unpeel the cellophane packages of mushrooms, only to discover mold at the bottom of each of container. Can we trim them and keep the rest? I don’t know. Better to toss them out, no? Do you think the guy knew? Maybe, but they were still trying to sell them earlier today… I think he meant well, but these things you really have to check for yourself.

As the hosts of Barcelona’s weekly Food Not Bombs dinner, the residents of the *okupa*, the squatted house I was living at, took it upon themselves to

collect food to cook and serve for free every Thursday. This meant that, in addition to collecting food to feed the 15+ people living in the house, they would make another trip on Wednesday nights to be sure there was enough to feed the 20 to 40 additional people that would come for dinner.

For years, groups around the world have organized similar meals under the banner of Food Not Bombs. The first Food Not Bombs dinner took place near here, in 1980, outside the Bank of Boston headquarters. It was put on by a group of anti-nuclear activists from Cambridge, Massachusetts[1] as a protest against the board of directors' investment in the Seabrook Nuclear Power station and various weapons firms. Since then, autonomous chapters have been started in cities all over the world. Each collective operating independently but based on the same premise, that enough resources exist to end chronic hunger, and only through structural inequalities in access and the prioritization of things like militarization, are billions of people kept under-nourished. While a number of recent articles have looked at Food Not Bombs and other "freegan" practices considering ideas of personhood they enable and their political efficacy as "new social movements" or "alternative food networks" (Clark 2004, Gross 2009, Barnard 2011, Edwards and Mercer 2013), for the purpose of this paper I'm more interested in understanding how and why these practices are discouraged and policed. If nothing makes eating the food outside the store inherently more

[1] "The Story of Food Not Bombs" http://foodnotbombs.net/story_of_food_not_bombs.html

dangerous than food inside the store (as these other articles, and my own experience eating garbage suggest) then why don't *more* people do it?

II.

A recent New York Times article entitled "Spain Recoils as Its Hungry Forage Trash Bins for a Next Meal[2]," opens with a similar street scene:

> "MADRID — On a recent evening, a hip-looking young woman was sorting through a stack of crates outside a fruit and vegetable store here in the working-class neighborhood of Vallecas as it shut down for the night.

At first glance, she looked as if she might be a store employee. But no. The young woman was looking through the day's trash for her next meal.

Recoil. The narrator highlights the shock of realizing that the young woman seen sorting through crates is, in fact, not a store employee. In Spain, it seems, *even the hip ones* have been reduced to eating garbage. At 33 –years old, the woman, a former postal worker, had run out of unemployment benefits. She was now squatting in a building with friends while collecting 'a little of everything' from the garbage." As the article reminds us:

> Such survival tactics are becoming increasingly commonplace here, with an unemployment rate over 50 percent among young people and more and more households having adults without jobs. So pervasive is the

[2] Daley, Suzanne. "Spain Recoils as its Forage Trash Bins for a Next Meal" *New York Times* (Sep 24, 2012); Frayer, Lauren. "To Scrape By, The Poor in Spain Go Dumpster Diving" *All Things Considered*, NPR (Nov 11, 2012); Muriel, Eduardo. "Tengo que buscar en la basura para llegar al fin de mes" *El Pais* (Aug 8, 2012).

> problem of scavenging that one Spanish city has resorted to installing locks on supermarket trash bins as a public health precaution."

Why recoil, we could ask. Why not get angry? Sad? Since 2008, a steady flow of news specials has presented images like this, framed to provoke not just concern, but bodily reaction, showing us the depths of economic hardship, the hopelessness and homelessness to which Spain's "lost generation" has been reduced. Some of these acknowledge that practices like scavenging existed long before the crisis. But few address the seeming contradiction - that alongside rising poverty, unemployment, hunger – there persists a vast, material surplus. Bellies might be empty, but the trash bins are full. How do we make sense of the visceral shock directed towards the person looking through the fruit crates, and not at the person throwing out food in the midst of a crisis? What logic leads cities like Girona in the northeast of Spain, to respond to desperation by locking their dumpsters? What vision of public safety is being protected?

Transgression, and more specifically, reactions to transgression, reveal the ways in which the sensory experience of public space is managed, sanitized and mediated. Disgust speaks to some of ethnography's oldest tropes like taboo, risk, and danger. Through Mary Douglas's classic definition of dirt as "matter out of place," we are reminded that to consider something filthy requires a particular social understanding of how things are supposed to be: "Dirt offends against order" and thus "eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment" (Douglas 1966: 2). In "Disgust and the

Anthropological Imagination," Deborah Durham notes that "To call disgust a 'feeling…brings out its linking of the sensory with the sensible, of the physical with the affective, and with the judgmental" (Durham 2011: 133). Enforcing the moral order requires limiting what should be seen, heard, smelled, touched, tasted and by who.

In an article on the politics of "dumpster-diving," Clark (2004) uses Levi-Strauss' distinction between "the raw, the cooked, and the rotten" to explain how a community of punks in Seattle seek out "raw" un-processed foods, and "rotten," or no-longer-commoditized foods, and reject the "cooked" – commercially processed and exchanged foods. In embracing "the rotten" by eating food reclaimed from dumpsters, Clark relates how punks raised White or middle class attempt to "dirty their bodies and tarnish their affiliation with a White, bourgeois power structure" (Clark 2004: 28). In seeking to be associated with marginalized populations, those who eat the "raw" and the "rotten" by necessity, the punks Clark discusses show not only that the food being discarded is still useful, but that the way in which these distinctions between practices are drawn and then mapped on to people are processes that reinforce racialized, economic power structures. While more Spaniards might be scavenging these days, the recuperation of waste – and especially scrap metal - has long been a means for Spain's poor, migrant and Roma populations to sustain themselves. The outrage conveyed by these news articles is thus also an outrage at seeing non-migrant,

and previously middle-class people doing such things and a fear of what this portends for the existing order.

III. To better understand how scavenging as one of a range of forbidden, savage practices is policed, we can also look at how others have been managed. In 2006, the Ajuntament (City Hall) of Barcelona announced the implementation of the Ordenança de Convivència Ciutadana (or "Citizen's Conviviality Ordinance"), a comprehensive set of restrictions on the use of public space, described as "promoting and ensuring peaceful coexistence in Barcelona."[3] The ordinance prohibits a broad array of activities, including: graffiti, begging, harassment, inappropriate playing of games and sports, sex work, gambling, noise pollution, improper use of parks and beaches, the unlicensed selling of food or goods in the street, the consumption of alcoholic beverages, and the relieving of physiological needs. It also includes the more flexible category: "improper use of public space," for behavior such as sleeping in public[4]. While incredibly broad, one thing these prohibited activities have in common - street soccer, sleeping on a park bench, public drinking, unlicensed food vending – is that they bypass the mediation of the state. They're unlicensed activities. They recoup no taxes. One can eat and drink outside, as long as it's at a restaurant. One can listen to loud

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[3] "Barcelona vol posar l'accent en la cultura del respecte a les persones i als béns a l'espai public" Daniel Venteo 2006. "Entra en vigor l'ordenança de convivència" http://www.bcn.cat/hisenda/pdf/ca/convivencia.pdf

[4] Infractions are assessed as either: mild, serious or very serious, and cooperation is encouraged through the use of fines, ranging from 120 euros to 3,000 euros (Nearly $4,000 US), depending on how an infraction is categorized.

music, but only at the Sonar music festival. In cases of "social exclusion" – signaling those either too poor or pathologically unable to use public space correctly - perpetrators are referred to social services and municipal integration programs. The inclusion of provisioning activities within the ordinance (such as street vending, sex work, and begging) defines them, by association with other practices (public urination, harassment, noise), as filthy, unhygienic, unnecessary, a disturbance contrary to the spirit of "*civismo*" and one without any place in the city. As an informational article explains: "Barcelona wants to put the accent on a culture of respect towards people and goods" (Venteo 2006). To use public space appropriately is to take part in this culture. In my fieldwork over the spring and summer of 2012 I was given two *multas* (or fines) by the Guàrdia Urbana: one was for public urination and the other was during a Food Not Bombs – the charge was occupation of a public way.

Marc Caellas, the author of *Carcelona* (2011), laments these shifts in the governance of the city, noting how residents have come to mock the policing of public space through this nickname – a play on *cárcel*, the Spanish word for jail. To live in the city is to live in a kind of constant state of surveillance and correction. He attributes this shift to the city's prioritization of tourism and global commerce. These priorities are pitted against the concerns of long-term residents who are increasingly displaced. He and others refer to the phenomena as "Disneyfication," a process he sees as having become especially prominent since the preparation for the 1992 Summer Olympics held in Barcelona (Unió

Temporal d'Escribes 2004, Delgado 2007). Gary McDonogh has noted how such "eventscapes," like the Olympics, and earlier World's Fair, have been used by Barcelona's elites to re-shape the city into a node of globally competitive, European modernity (McDonogh 2011). As McDonogh notes, these temporally discrete events inform ongoing policies that seek to bring the city and broader Catalan autonomous region closer to Europe and further from Spain, policies like the 2006 Ordenança de Convivència, or the 2004 Llei de Barris (or Neighborhoods Law) providing money for rehabilitating degraded areas of cities in the Catalan region. Such interventions have moved from earlier conceptualizations of the need for "clinicalizing" especially "pathological" neighborhoods to a regime that encompasses the entire city, region and state (McDonogh 1991: 336).

Enforcement efforts like the Ordenança de Convivencia have sought to erase the role which informal provisioning has always played in the construction and maintenance of the city. However, these practices continue precisely because of their interdependent nature. Susan Narotzky (2012) warns against the categorization of informal provisioning as a new "savage economic slot," of alternatives. Formal practices are defined as such in contradiction to the informal, but they are always materially intertwined. JK Gibson-Graham and others have called for a rejection of capitalocentric understandings of the economy that render many forms of economic activity invisible (Gibson-Graham 2006, Gross 2009). But identifying that "diverse economies" already exist is not,

in itself, enough to challenge processes of active marginalization. We also need to account for the ways in which some practices are valued and others taken off the table.

Media reports associate de-commoditized foods with an aura of dirtiness and desperation. Police enforce permit systems and the definition of public space as a zone of commerce. An overarching call for a “culture of respect” precludes informal work. All of these things define abnormality, practices which citizens are exhorted to avoid, in order to demonstrate their *civismo* - their proper use of public space. The threat of being seen as savage, as unable to live up to normalized practices of work and consumption is thus recruited as a powerful tool for erasing the multitude of provisioning practices households utilize and importantly, the ways in which they are made to seem separate. As "average" Spanish populations are seen engaging in "savage" economic practices, the framework for condemning scavenging and other non-market provisioning practices as criminal or pathological is no longer tenable. The participation of Spanish citizen in practices associated with migrants, political radicals, and the "socially excluded," is recruited as evidence of systemic breakdown. But rather than let it break, the state intervenes to save the market, against the needs of a growing underclass. The eliciting of disgust directed towards the consumption of discarded food is but one way a “capitalocentric” imagination of public space is enforced. As a recruitment of embodied judgment it allows us to see how the

city is policed; how order works both on, and through, our sensual experience.

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