Food Waste Reduction

Political Consumerism and Tactics of Resisting Consumerist Overflow

By Liia-Maria Raippalinna

In affluent countries, most people live in and with a (material) overflow (Czarniawska & Löfgren 2012; Löfgren 2019). Waste is material in movement, and we cannot help producing it, any more than we can avoid facing material flows when engaging with daily activities, such as shopping, eating, and cooking (Sjöstrand 2018:213). Every day, however, we face numerous expectations on how to deal with and manage the material flow: keep order, sort out, dispose, restrict, recycle etc. (Löfgren 2019). At the beginning of the twenty-first century an alarming new aspect of overflow was raised globally in public debate: according to estimates, one third of food produced globally ends up lost or wasted (Gustavsson et al. 2011). In affluent societies households constitute the major single source of food waste (Katajajuuri et al. 2014).

In Finland, the mobilization of consumers to reduce food waste started at the beginning of the 2010s (Raippalinna 2020). The past decade witnessed a growing fight against food waste throughout Finnish society and in all parts of food supply chain. Furthermore, consumer education took various forms in conventional and social media as well as in schools, catering, and marketing. On a grass-root level, the issue gained popularity among individuals and civil society actors initiating and participating in various campaigns and projects. A nationwide *Food Waste Awareness Week* called Hävikkiviikko ("Wastage Week") has been organized annually since 2013. The campaign weeks organized by Consumers' Union of Finland, an organization aiming to promote the interests and rights of Finnish consumers, draw togeth-

1. Diners at the Food Waste Festival. Copyright Author.

er different actors, providing them with information and campaign materials and a joint platform for consumer education. In September 2017, the campaign week climaxed with a one-day consumer education event, *The Food Waste Festival* (Hävikkifestarit), funded by the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The festival took place in Teurastamo, Helsinki, a former slaughterhouse area recently renovated into a scene for urban food culture and happenings.

This article is based on eight open-ended thematic interviews conducted with people attending the Food Waste Festival. Informants were highly educated, middle-class Finnish men and women living in the urban metropolitan area of Helsinki during the festival. Two of them participated as presenters, six as ordinary visitors. Their age varied from the early twenties to the early sixties, most were in working life. They were concerned about food waste, aware of related discussions and sought to avoid food waste in their everyday life. Some of them had previous experiences in food waste related projects. In the interviews I asked them about food waste reduction in their everyday life and as a societal question, focusing on their own views and experiences.

I investigate how individual agency and responsibility are constructed in everyday food waste avoidance and reduction practices. Approaching the question through the concepts of political consumerism (e.g. Klintman & Boström 2006) and everyday tactics (de Certeau 1984) I particularly ask how the practice of food waste reduction enacts resistance towards consumerist overflow. Focusing on everyday tactics, as relatively invisible individual, and collective actions (of resistance) that are played out in the micro-level of everyday life, gives insights into how and why individuals take responsibility on food waste reduction and puts the spotlight on the everyday situations and personal projects (Ortner 2006) in which the political project of food waste reduction is enacted and made meaningful. In this approach, consumers are not seen as disempowered puppets of markets or social practices, nor is the active political character of consumers and consumption overemphasized (see Evans et al. 2017:1400; Stigzelius 2018:476).

The idea of focusing on consumerist overflow and resistance evolved when I read the interview transcripts. However, the cultural tendency of resisting consumerist overflow was not necessarily explicitly stated in the research material. As an analysis method I used resisting reading (Fetterley 1978; Lakomäki, Latvala & Lauren 2011), a method for identifying signs of cultural beliefs and practices that are not obviously present in the research material. This meant investigating cultural dynamics that were not in the focus of the interviews and overcoming my own initial assumptions as an interviewer; when conducting the interviews I was interested in the way interviewees adopted framings from public and media discourse, and neither consumerism nor resistance had occurred to me as relevant. In addition, resisting reading meant searching for signs of cultural ideas and practices that frame interviewees' thinking and action without *necessarily* being acknowledged. For instance, my interviewees would not necessarily identify themselves as political consumers nor consider themselves as resisting consumerism when avoiding and

reducing food waste. Some might, but this was impossible to tell based on the data.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I introduce the political project of food waste reduction, situate my research in the broader field of political consumerism, and present my theoretical conceptualization of everyday tactics of resistance. Then I present the Food Waste Festival as the context of my study. In the analysis I show how food waste reduction is positioned against consumerist overflow, present the everyday tactics of resisting it, and discuss individual agency and the transformative potential of everyday tactics in relation to the "big wheel" of consumerist society. I conclude by stressing the importance of understanding the resistant character of responsibility and the cultural power invested in resisting consumerist overflow.

Food Waste Reduction as Political Consumerism

Food waste typically refers to wastage of food and drink in retail and consumption, whereas losses occurring in early stages of the food supply chain are referred to as food loss (see Parfit et al. 2010). In Finnish, both are indicated by the term *ruokahävikki* (literally "food loss"). A remarkable reduction of food waste and food loss is needed to sustainably feed the growing global population, for environmental impacts of food production already exceed planetary boundaries (Willet et al. 2019). This is also singled out as a target in UN sustainability goal 12, sustainable consumption. Because the majority of wastage in European societies takes place during consumption (Katajajuuri et al. 2014), raising consumer responsibility by education has been prioritized as part of the EU food waste policies. Thus, food waste reduction joins other sustainability discourses in producing responsible consumers (Evans et al. 2017) and a preferred subject position (Hall 1997:56) of the responsible consumer-citizen. In educational events like the Food Waste Festival the position of the responsible consumer can be promoted, negotiated, and adopted.

Consumer is a historically shifting category and identity created in the nineteenth century (Evans et al. 2017; Trentmann 2005). Consumerism is the fundamental ideology of global capitalism (Schmitt 2022:76). *Political consumerism* seeks impact through consumption. It has been emphasized as part of neoliberal governmentality, where responsibility for e.g. the environmental effects of consumption is put on individual consumers (see e.g. Evans et al. 2017; Istenič 2018; Sandberg 2014). The focus on consumer responsibility has been criticized for masking the need for structural transformation and hiding the role of social practices that organize our everyday life and consumption (see Gille 2012; Evans et al. 2017; Welch et al. 2018: 6; Niva et al. 2019). Correspondingly, the transformative potential of political consumerism has been questioned since it seeks change through means determined by consumption capitalism – expecting consumption to fix problems caused by consumption (see Evans et al. 2017:1398). On the other hand, (political) consumption provides new resources for citizenship and political identification and mobilization (Trentmann, 2007:148–149).

Finnish media discourse and consumer education has emphasized individual consumers' responsibility for their own food waste (Raippalinna 2020). However, citi-

zen-consumers have multiple roles in food waste reduction; in addition to polishing individual conduct, they may act as agents of change-seeking cultural transformation (Närvänen et al. 2018b). Like other sustainable consumption, food waste avoidance and reduction can be seen as *political consumption* as it involves deliberate action and goals that go beyond the immediate self-interest of their practitioners, such as reducing food waste and increasing the sustainability of the food system (see Klintman & Boström 2006:401; Närvänen et al. 2018b). Political consumption may seek to influence other actors, such as other consumers, retailers, producers, or policy makers (Niva et al. 2019:188) and not only by means of direct consumption. In food waste reduction, public and visible forms of sustainable/political consumerism, such as seeking change through social media campaigns (see Närvänen et al. 2018a), merge with private and invisible forms that take place in routinized everyday actions. The latter can be called *everyday political consumption* (Niva et al. 2019).

Macro-level political goals and pursuits are translated into meaningful and doable practices in real-life situations on a local level (Cherrier 2006; Klintman & Boström 2006); like other cultural processes, they are enacted (or not) in the seemingly "trivial practices of everyday life" (see Jönsson 2019:19). In everyday food activities, environmental and societal consequences emphasized in public discourse often connect with private virtues (Niva et al. 2019). This is particularly true of food waste reduction. Binning food contradicts our cultural norms and ideals (e.g. Evans 2014; Lehtokunnas 2020; Raippalinna 2022). Waste avoidance and recycling are the most popular sustainability actions among Finns (see Niva et al. 2018), and a vast majority of Finns find food waste reduction important or extremely important (Silvennoinen et al. 2013:40). Also in Finnish media discourse on food waste, environmental and sustainability aims merge with cultural ideologies of thrift and frugality, traditionally encouraged as part of good citizenship in home economics education (Raippalinna 2020). Against this background, food waste reduction appears as a bundle of everyday practices (Marshall 2016:50–51) with different roots, aims, and rationales being combined and developed as a common political project.

Everyday Tactics of Resistance

In this article I show how the cultural project of food waste reduction, and the various actions people take to avoid and reduce food waste, derive power from a cultural tendency to resist the material overflow in consumerist societies. To analyse the resistant character of food waste reduction, I employ Michel de Certeau's (1984) concepts *another production*, *strategies*, and *tactics*. By another production, de Certeau means production by masses who in the capitalist economic system have been marginalized from dominant cultural production. The concept puts the spotlight on minor everyday actions, by which marginalized masses use and take over products of consumer society, pointing out the creative and resistant everyday procedures of groups and individuals acting within the consumerist system of production and consumption (de Certeau 1984: xii–xvii).

To describe the relation of production and another production, de Certeau invokes the conceptual pair of strategies and

tactics. *Strategies*[1] refer to calculations of power relationships that take place when a subject (a business, a government) can be isolated from its exterior and postulates a place of its own, from which it can manage external targets and threats, such as consumers or competitors (Buchanan 2000:87; de Certeau 1984:xx, 34–39). *Tactics*, in contrast, do not have a place of their own but take place in a space occupied by others (strategies). Tactics come in when navigating the unpredictable flow of everyday life: taking a chance on what happens, utilizing external forces for one's own purposes. Many everyday practices are tactical. For example, shopping and cooking require creative combining of available elements at the right moment: "In the supermarket, the housewife confronts heterogeneous and mobile data – what she has in the refrigerator, the tastes, appetites, and moods of her guests, the best buys and their possible combinations with what she already has on hand at home etc." (de Certeau 1984:xix).

De Certeau's concept of tactics is often understood as celebrating consumers' possibilities to resist and to take over products of consumer society (e.g. Paterson 2006:153–159). Ian Buchanan (2000), however, suggests that rather than being liberating or revolutionary, what is called "tactics" merely produces utopian belief in the possibility of transformation. In my analysis I combine these two readings to uncover different aspects of resisting tactics in my data and to open insights on the intertwined dynamics of utopian resistance and transformative agency in everyday political consumption. A similar approach regarding agency, stability, and transformation can be found in another practice theorists, the anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2006:129):

> Culture (in a very broad sense) constructs people as particular kinds of social actors, but social actors, through their living, on-the-ground, variable practices, reproduce or transform – and usually some of each – the culture that made them. […] [From this perspective] social life is seen as something that is actively played, oriented towards culturally constituted goals and projects, and involving both routine practices and intentional action.

Ortner situates individual agency, in relation to cultural practices, in the pursuit of goals and enactment of culturally constituted personal projects – "serious games" (2006:129–153). The agency of a cultural project means playing and trying to play one's own serious games, defined by one's own values and ideals, within the dominating situation. She states that to understand agency, we need to understand what these cultural games are, what their ideological underpinnings are, and how playing the game reproduces or transforms these underpinnings (ibid.:152). Here I situate everyday tactics of resisting the consumerist overflow as part of individual enactment(s) of the culturally constituted project(s) of food waste reduction, the (more or less) serious games attuned to creative use of possibilities in reaching one's goals within the dominance of consumer society. People assume the political goal (food waste reduction) and the subject position provided (responsible consumer) because it fits and serves their own serious games. They take on individual responsibility to have agency: to play the game.

At The Food Waste Festival

I start my analysis from the Food Waste Festival, where the interviewees were recruited, because it characterizes the situational context of my research (see

Raippalinna 2022). At the main doors of the festival building, good-humoured visitors were welcomed by friendly organizers. From the entrance, one could see the middle hall with long tables filled with diners enjoying a three-course meal made of donated retail surplus. A transparent plastic cube was placed on the welcome desk, to collect voluntary payments for lunch; the money would be donated to protect the Baltic Sea. Posters for *Hävikkiviikko* (Wastage Week) were hanging on the walls, and a special thematic issue of *Kuluttajalehti,* the magazine of the Finnish Consumer Union, was displayed on a magazine rack. Inside the building visitors could meet dozens of presenters: for instance the Rural Women's Advisory Organization (Maa- ja kotitalousnaiset) had composed a pile of food items demonstrating the average amount of food wasted annually by Finnish households; home economics students gave instruction in the optimal way of measuring temperature and situating food items in a fridge; the Helsinki Region Environmental Services (HSY) provided an educational game on recycling; and several companies and social enterprises working with surplus redistribution presented themselves and their services and products. In a fancy show-kitchen, we got to follow cooking demonstrations where food bloggers shared their tips on how to make use of surplus and leftover foods that often remain unused at home.

2. Entrance to the Food Waste Festival. Copyright Author.

The interviews took place in spring 2019, more than a year after the festival. They were conducted at the interviewees' homes or in a café, according to their choice, and lasted from one to two and half hours.[2] The food waste festival was brought up in the interview situation as I opened each interview by asking for the interviewee's reason for attending it. The positions my interviewees took when replying to the question – as visiting consumers, as presenters, or as interested professionals – remained dominant through the interviews and characterized their relation to food waste reduction and education. Two interviewees, Karina and Markus, participated in the festival as presenters. Markus (30 years old) represented a company involved in surplus business and mainly spoke from this professional position. Karina (45) was there because of her studies, presenting at a display stand that promoted household skills. She represented herself primarily as a concerned citizen-consumer with a routinized enactment of food waste avoidance in her

everyday life, but she also had professional interest in food and food education.

The other six interviewees participated in the festival as visitors, but as it turned out, most of them had some previous experiences of food waste reduction. Ulla (40) was professionally engaged in food and sustainability issues and teaching and voluntarily involved in a food waste reduction project that engaged her several days a week. She had come to the festival to see how cooking demonstrations were conducted and to develop her own know-how on similar projects. Tuukka (35) had encountered the issue of food waste earlier in his business studies and attended the festival to find out about new developments in the field. He was eager to adapt the available information for "questioning" the choices he made in his own life and those made in his environment. Tanja (55) positioned herself as an urban dweller and an eager consumer of urban culture and food happenings. She had previously worked in a food culture development project in the city and continued following the field. For her, the food waste festival – eating out, enjoying the happening, and satisfying her curiosity – compared with other urban events.

Jani, Anna, and Elsa represented themselves above all as regular consumers – albeit far more concerned than average. Food waste reduction was an integral part of their daily conduct. Anna (30) and Jani (20) looked for potential tips and advice on how to avoid and reduce food waste even more efficiently. Anna particularly wondered how she would cope with the food overflow as her then small baby grew older. Elsa (65), a recently retired single dweller, was the only one who had not come to the festival for knowledge and education. She was there to meet a friend and enjoy a lunch. She took a complete outsider position in relation to the festival, stating that she never wastes food. While thinking she would not make use of any tips or advice provided at the festival, she was familiar with the food waste problem, appreciated consumer education, and was curious about the event: "[I was surprised] that they really put on a festival for that!"

The Food Waste Festival demonstrates how food waste reduction takes place at the intersection of public policies and individual agency (see Cherrier 2006); it constitutes a site for enacting the image of the responsible, active, political consumer on real people (see Stigzelius 2006). For organizers this meant educating visitors about food waste, providing them with motivation and models for action, and serving them tips and ideas on food waste avoidance and reduction. For visitors, this meant deliberate choices to be educated: selective looking for knowledge and ideas to apply in personal and civic life. On both sides, the preferred subject position of active consumer-citizen is produced, negotiated, and enacted. Participating in the festival as part of their personal projects, interviewees construct their own agency as consumers but also as professionals and active citizens. Simultaneously, the festival serves as a site for tuning and passing on everyday tactics of food waste avoidance and reduction. In the following, I move on to discuss these tactics and how they enact resistance to consumerism.

Resisting the Consumerist Overflow

When talking about food waste, interviewees positioned themselves in relation to

consumerism, consumer society and consumer culture.[3] Jani represented himself as extremely thrifty and generally unwilling to buy anything new as long the old things "somehow work". He took clothing as an example, stating that a couple of outfits is all he really needs. He explained his reluctance to consume with his antagonism towards mass culture as a teenager:

> Jani: I've never been like that kind of mass teenager who gets obsessed with clothes […] I didn't want to buy them for I didn't want to be part of that group.

The confrontation with consumerism was most evident when discussing reasons for food waste on a general level: suggested reasons mostly related to culture of consumption. As Elsa states, "it has turned into… this thing with consumption." The interviewees made meaning of food waste reduction through various discourses (Raippalinna 2022), but the discourses came together in opposing wastefulness and excessive consumption as unwanted symptoms of consumerism. For Elsa, the meaning and rationale of food waste reduction was related to the cultural virtue of frugality (see Raippalinna 2022). Referring to media discourse, she disapproved of the fact that even unopened sausage packs are found in trash bins: "What was the person thinking who threw it [away]?" The thrown-away sausages symbolized the wasteful consumerist attitudes she persistently refused to accept.

In public discourse on food waste, western consumers' attitudes and requirements are often represented as resulting in wastage. My interviewees also pointed to consumers' demands for "straight cucumbers" and "a million flavours of yoghourt" as reasons for wastage. However, in addition to individual attitudes, consumerism was attributed to products, marketing ideologies, and retail practices that make people buy more than they consume. "Supermarkets" and "24/7" stood out as symbols of consumer culture, where too many goods are too easily available. Markus describes the root causes of food waste problem as an "Amazon Prime problem":

> Markus: As I see it, the biggest problem is a kind of selfishness of human, humankind, "I want it all now" attitude. And that it is possible to buy as much as you want, whatever you want, whenever you want, wherever you want. It is like a basic Amazon Prime problem: if it is possible to get anything on your door in 24 hours, you start buying it. […] Like, consumption is being made too easy, you don't individually have to face the bad consequences. You buy twenty-eight different packs of fresh pasta, use one and bin the twenty-seven remaining ones. You bought it all because you didn't have to choose among the twenty-eight alternatives. Why not take them all? […] Of course, it makes no sense, but no one will come and tell you it was you who destroyed the world. It's like easy to [say]: Hey, I am only one small human being. You know, it's too easy to destroy the world, it's too much fun.

Markus's example is exaggerated but it describes the way interviewees positioned themselves and other consumers within the economic system that drives and encourages excessive consumption. In many interviews, individualistic consumer culture was represented as alienation from food and food production caused by the capitalist economy. Karina explained that if food is just a package bought from the supermarket, the labour of food production becomes invisible. As a possible solution to the food

waste problem, she suggested changing the production system from multinational, industrial processes to shorter food chains, local food, and alternative production methods, such as cooperatives. This would increase people's possibilities to participate in and understand food production: "it is more difficult to throw away food when you see where it comes from, and how [...] you do get a different kind of, respect for it". Ulla likewise brought up the problem of invisible food chains. Reflecting on reasons for wastage, she connected the capitalist economic system with individualistic and consumerist western culture:

> Ulla: [the food waste problem relates to] probably many things, well, for certain our capitalist economic system, somehow […] Western culture emphasizes individualism […] Like we're no longer attached to communities and life gets hard […] We no longer can build a nourishing relation to food, it's just energy to fill in […] We are so far from communality, sharing things […] The beginning of the food chain has become invisible. When it is invisible, you no longer respect the labour that must be done to produce good-quality food, then you don't want to pay for it. Then it doesn't matter much if you throw it away. It is not personally meaningful to you, so you don't appreciate it.

In de Certeau's terms, consumerism appears as a *strategy* as it defines and frames our social life with its rhythms and rules. Most people have little choice but to buy their foods and goods from markets and adopt the provided position of consumer (Schmitt et al. 2022:75–76). As consumers, people can use their freedom of choice for (everyday) political ends, but the available choices are framed by capitalist logics, that also produce overconsumption and wastage. Taking responsibility by enacting everyday political consumerism in a supermarket appears as resistance to this logic within this limited space. While some interviewees thought that a more respectful relationship to food could be built in alternative food chains, this would take much more effort: Karina had thought of joining a food circle but explained with frustration: "It is so much easier to drive a car to a supermarket and buy it all at once, and cheaper too."

In the interviews, consumerism was represented as an inescapable social reality, the hegemonic state of the world. Situated everywhere, and nowhere in particular, it is "a powerful and evocative symbol" (Nava 1996) of predominant capitalist realities and environmental destruction. In this context, consuming responsibly and participating in food waste reduction offers an available way to resist wasteful consumer culture and enact non-consumeristic values, identities, and ideologies – whether based on traditional ideologies of thrift and frugality or on current sustainability concerns.

Everyday Tactics of Food Waste Avoidance

Living with perishable matter requires continuous work (Watson & Meah 2012; Evans 2014; Lehtokunnas et al. 2020): planning what to eat, where and when; monitoring processes in food items; moving, storing, sorting out, and cleansing food items; keeping order in the refrigerator and remembering what there is; composing meals; handling over unneeded stuff; throwing spoiled stuff in biowaste; adapting to various schedules and activities; improvising in unexpected situations, etc. Both food waste and food waste avoidance are products of situated negotiations, where food waste avoidance is consolidated with

other aims and values, such as health, safety, caring, hospitality, preferences, taste, and pleasant family meals (Watson & Meah 2012; Evans 2014; Lehtokunnas et al. 2020). Moreover, these negotiations take place in relation to materials (such as foodstuffs, kitchen equipment, storage space) and competences (purchase, evaluation, cooking) in the context of social practices (retail, cooking dinner, work) and the spatiotemporal organization of everyday life (see Marshall 2016:222–223).

Interviewees had developed different tactics to cope with the everyday overflow. They would not throw away food items unless they were spoiled, and preventing foodstuffs from spoiling required a combination of tactics from planning and purchasing to composing meals and evaluating he edibility of leftovers. Overprovisioning results in food waste, and hence doing groceries in a supermarket was regarded as a risky practice. Karina trusted in combining good planning with creativity. Her weekly shopping lists included the basic stuff for preparing varied, tasty, healthy, and environmentally friendly meals for four: one or two meat dishes, some fish and vegetarian options and enough supplements. She was a trained cook and regarded herself as handier than average at improvising, seasoning, and making use of whatever she could find in the fridge. Jani mostly cooked just for himself and saved most of the planning for the supermarket. The way he described his groceries shows how tactics mean navigating different aims, fears, and possibilities related to health, price, taste, sustainability, and a wide variety of available products:

> Jani: When I go to a food store and see a product with a red [discount] label on it, I try to think what [food items] I have at home. [Thinking] this will suffice for four days if there is like 400 grams of meat or something. Then I buy other foods trying to keep in mind what I have already picked. You can't then take other products like that. And I check best-before dates, I can cook it a couple of days after, but I don't go further. I try to keep eating different things for lunch and dinner, like for change. Then if you buy that pack of minced meat and make dinner from it for days, then you take something else for lunch, like packed meals, like if you find them at a 30 per cent discount [because the best-by date is near], you can take them. Or if you have like a can of pea soup at home…

Tactics take place in space defined by consumerism – the dominant strategy they seek to resist. To resist the consumerist overflow, people make use of services (discount products, surplus food markets, buffet restaurants, online groceries selling surplus food) and products (kitchen equipment, meals made of leftover items) provided by consumer society itself. As Markus notes, "this crazy consumer society makes it possible to live from hand to mouth, you don't need to plan now that you can get food 24/7." His tactic was to keep the fridge as empty as possible. He and his partner used to decide after work if they wanted to cook or if (and most often) they felt more like eating out or having a takeaway for dinner.

Current urban environments provide new elements to the tactics of resistance, offering products and services marketed as food waste reduction. After having encountered the mobile application ResQ Club at the Food Waste Festival, Tuukka and his partner used it regularly to find a cheap takeaway dinner after workdays. Tanja, living in a small apartment with limited space for cooking and preservation,

had also made consuming surplus a daily practice. She bought a surplus lunch sold at three euros at a diner at her workplace and enjoyed it at the office next day. She had even managed to engage some of her workmates, and together they formed "a small group of food waste fighters" who visited the diner regularly at closing time.

Resisting the overflow requires work with the self (see Lehtokunnas et al. 2020). Also resisting tactics are not only directed outside to wasteful society, but towards oneself and one's own habituation. Anna and Jani attended the festival hoping to get ideas on how to avoid food waste even more efficiently than they already did – and thus to resist the overflow even better. Anna described how she and her partner had disputed about outdated food items found in the back of the kitchen drawer. In the light of the information provided at the festival, she now thought that her partner had done the right thing using cocoa powder several years after its best-by date. After the festival Jani had gained more confidence in trusting his own senses. He described unlearning from following the best-by dates as a continuous learning process where he had to overcome his own fears, affects and habituation.

Particularly for Elsa, tactics of food waste avoidance were effortless, routinized, and habitual. Extremely confident as she was with her routines and skills, even the wide variety of choice in the supermarket provided her with possibilities rather than risks. Through her embodied practice of resistance, she used the available products (frozen vegetables, salad buffet, warm dishes) for her own purposes, immersing them into her overwhelming practice of frugality. Her tactics seemed so routinized that their resistance becomes visible only through her deep and obvious disapproval of wasting food, for instance as reported in the media.

Utopian Belief and Transforming Agency

When I asked if Elsa had tried to influence food waste reduction by any other means than through her own food-related practices, she thought for a while and answered, "No, I have not gone to educate my neighbours." Everyday resistance to consumerist overflow is primarily enacted quietly in daily life, embedded in everyday practices, such as shopping, cooking, and dining. In de Certeau's terms, practices of food waste reduction/avoidance can be seen as another production, where the use of consumer spaces, goods, and services is turned into a meaningful activity. Through consumption as another production, the material targets of resistance (foodstuffs) are turned into means of enacting the personal projects of resistance.

Instead of making its own products, another production leaves its traces on practices, ways of using and doing (de Certeau 1984:xiii, 31–32) – the tactics themselves. These tactics are passed on in communities, bringing continuity and permanence in cultures (de Certeau 1984:xix). For example, learning to evaluate and use outdated food items produces confidence and habituation that can be passed on horizontally across generations or vertically from one consumer to another. They are also passed on as mentalities and practices, inherited from previous generations, such as leftover recipes (see Raippalinna 2022). Even consumer education campaigns on food waste (see e.g. Närvänen et al. 2018a) pass on

tactics, as they both derive from and feed the everyday tactics of resistance. More generally, everyday resistance to consumerist overflow is encouraged in discourses that seek to make active citizen-consumers: traditional home economics discourse, encouraging thrift and frugality and seeking to protect households and nations from poverty, has recently merged with sustainability discourse pushing consumers to fight issues in the system of production and consumption (Raippalinna 2022).

In everyday practices, tactics of food waste reduction and avoidance materialize into concrete outcomes, such as salvaged food, reduced food waste, and their assumed environmental impact. Environmental effects of salvaging different food items from wastage can be measured and calculated, as demonstrated in consumer education slogans, such as "Finnish household food waste corresponds to annual greenhouse emissions of 139,000 cars" (STT 2022). In tactics, the minor everyday actions with their concrete and calculable impacts combine with a utopian vision (Buchanan 2000) of a non-wasteful, more sustainable, and less consumerist society. The utopian character of tactics relates to scaling, that is, the meaning of tactics and their outcomes in the bigger picture. Food waste avoidance tactics are not enough to transform the food system (see Willet et al. 2019) and solve the "the giant question we need to solve, as humankind" (Ulla), but they keep up the utopian belief that "there should be something left of the world for the children" (Anna). As stated by Buchanan (2000), tactics do, but do no more than, "disrupt the fatality of the established order", they are not liberatory or transformative on any great scale. Yet they remind us of the possibility of change and create a hopeful space within the inescapable consumer society and its wasteful and destructive practices. The combination of hopefulness and hopelessness is visible in the way Anna explained her own agency:

> Anna: Of course people can think that finishing a plate won't help anything… How does it help anyone in Africa, or anyone at all now that we're running out of food? But that is the kind of question that all you can do is your own part. If you don't waste food, you can at least think that… [at least] you can play your own part.

While some tactics rather safeguard their practitioners from (participating in) the consumerist overflow, others aim to develop more sustainable processes and practices (on different framings of political consumerism, see Klintman 2006:430–431). For example, Anna and Markus saw consumers salvaging restaurant surplus as part of a wider change. From their point of view, innovative services that made surplus food available to consumers offered an easy way of acting responsibly, normalized the consumption of surplus, and changed our cultural conceptions. From this perspective, fetching surplus food using a mobile application imposes cultural transformation – and provides an example of food waste reduction as *everyday political consumption*.

In most interviews, daily social situations were mentioned as possibilities to seek impact by discussing, setting an example, or proposing alternatives. This is "some kind of activism", Jani concluded when describing a potluck dinner party, where he had tried to ensure that everything was eaten up. Ulla was explicit about the

activist character of her involvement in a voluntary food waste reduction project that took her several days a week. However, she made a clear distinction from political "frontline" activism:

Ulla: I am the kind of person who easily takes responsibility, wants to make something concrete. But then again, I am not the kind, being in the frontline, like activists. This is kind of like everyday activism, what I practise.

In the voluntary project, Ulla was herself involved in establishing new, less wasteful practices by which she sought concrete material impacts and cultural transformations. She described her action as "everyday activism", meaning concrete action and taking responsibility within the system she wanted to change. While she had also been involved in more marginal practices such as dumpster diving for food, she was determined to position herself in the mainstream, in the consumer society.[4] The interviewees wanted to represent themselves as ordinary people trying to avoid wasting food, consume reasonably, and do their bit in the pursuit of sustainability. Referring to common sense and good life, ordinariness bears moral and symbolic significance in our culture (Hellesund et al. 2018:95–97). While underlining that they produced less food waste than average consumers, they emphasised not being (at least trying not to be) "straitlaced" [*tiukkapoinen*] "fanatical" [*fanaattinen*], or "crazy acknowledging" [*hullun tiedostava*]. Markus described this by saying: "I don't wake up in the night and think about world being destroyed, and I don't expect that from anybody. However, occasionally, you think about the things you maybe shouldn't do."

Nevertheless, most interviewees felt anxious facing the current "state of the world" and, as expressed by Jani, carried the sorrows of the world on their shoulders. While eco-anxiety often appears as shame, depression, ignorance, or powerlessness, it may also lead to problem-solving, practical action, and rethinking behaviour and lifestyles, both individually and collectively (Pihkala 2021). For some of my interviewees, food waste avoidance and reduction seemed to provide a channel for turning anxiety into action. Ulla explained what makes people volunteer in their food waste reduction project:

Ulla: For many people, for me too, the reason for getting involved in the project is the possibility to do something concrete. It diminishes the general anxiety in the face of this gigantic [environmental] question we need to solve, as humankind. No matter how small our impact is, it is good if we can channel somehow, to problem-solving, together with other people. That is good.

Taking responsibility for food waste enables agency, a sense of doing something. Most interviewees positioned themselves in relation to the big wheel powered by the consumer society whose wastefulness they tried to resist. Tuukka was particularly clear on this, as he politely questioned my assumed focus on consumer food waste reduction: "Not that food waste is meaningless, but it is more important that the big wheel will turn around". He meant the connectivity of food waste reduction to other environmental and sustainability issues and to the societal and political context of solving the sustainability issues and sharing responsibility between different actors (producers, retailers, consumers,

public policies). For most interviewees, food waste reduction was comparable and closely linked to other fields of sustainable consumption, like diets and transportation. While they were critical of their own possibilities to impact the bigger picture, they still wanted to take agency. Markus, working in commercial surplus redistribution, explained his professional position in the bigger picture as follows.

> Markus: For me it is enough that I know that I can really do something about food waste reduction. It is closer to where I stand. I can like help in diminishing the proportion [of food wasted]. Like there is not much I can do about, like what kind of climate political decisions are made in big industries. It is more important for me that I can understand the concrete means that individuals can take [to reduce food waste]. Therefore, it is like the right place for me, what I am doing right now.

Food waste reduction enables individual agency in the context of consumer society. Resistance enacted in food waste reduction takes place in relation to (at least) two hegemonic discourses, one producing responsible consumers, the other economic growth and consumption. Both relate to consumerist ideology. Whereas structures of consumer society frame the way people live their lives, consumer education on sustainability increasingly requires them to take responsibility for the environmental and ethical burden of their consumption, including food waste. While people may be critical of putting the responsibility on consumers, assuming the preferred subject position of responsible consumer provides an available means to resist the consumerist overflow. In food waste reduction, private tactics of practical-utopian resistance merge into political consumption with more clearly stated goals: to educate and engage other people; to provide trajectories for surplus food; to encourage retailers and producers to reduce their food waste; to transform diets and food culture.

Conclusions

In this article I have shown how the cultural project of food waste reduction draws together quiet and routinized forms of resisting consumerist overflow, turning them into more organized action and agency: (everyday) political consumption. The research was based on interviews with people participating in a consumer education event, the Food Waste Festival. I approached consumer responsibility on food waste (reduction) through the concepts of political consumption and everyday tactics (of resistance). I used these concepts to investigate the personal and cultural project(s) of food waste reduction represented in the interviews and to increase understanding of the cultural dynamics at work in food waste reduction. Discussing food waste reduction in terms of intertwined dynamics of utopian resistance and empowering political consumption, I opened new insights into how and why people take agency with food waste and adopt the position of responsible consumer-citizen. The interviewees positioned food waste reduction in opposition to the material overflow in consumerist societies. From this perspective, consumerism stands out as a symbol for the current unsustainable way of life and the hegemonic realities beyond individual reach and control. Tactics of food waste avoidance and reduction – making a shopping list, cleansing vegetables, purchasing outdating products – serve to resist the consumerist overflow and provide some control over

one's own actions in everyday environments framed by consumerism. Through everyday tactics of food waste avoidance and reduction, people make their own spaces within the system. As part of the recent political and cultural sustainability projects, private tactics of resistance merge into political consumption with more clearly stated goals. People engage in everyday political consumption in multiple positions, not only as consumers, but also as citizens, professionals and activists who encourage active citizenship by enacting political consumerism on other people. The interviewees' projects around food waste reduction are both personal (not doing like the rest) and political (engaging other people to take on the project and play the game).

My analysis shows that in real-life consumption practices, empowering and utopian dimensions of everyday tactics are often intertwined. Tactics of food waste reduction are both empowering and transformative *and* utopian and non-transformative. They are utopian because they do not disturb the hegemonic order; while keeping up belief in a better future and a more equal and sustainable world, tactics are not powerful enough to change the way things are: right here and now people (practically) do not have any other option but to live in the capitalist consumerist system that causes the overflow and to resist it from within by the means it allows. Yet, tactics make space for individual agency. Tactics empower people to act and employ their own projects (whatever they are) while expecting more profound measures from more powerful actors, such as businesses and policies.

The interviewees do adopt the provided subject position of responsible consumer, but they also use it as a resource to "take over" and "make their own" products, services, and practices provided by the powers of consumer society. Taking responsibility may not provide a way out of wasteful consumerism – indeed putting responsibility on the individual is a strategy of market liberalism (Sandberg 2014:7–8) – but enacting responsibility enables developing and passing on tactics of resistance and opens possibilities for enacting resistance in daily life. In the meanwhile, the notion of responsibility turns the numerous private gestures of resisting consumerism into presentable mainstream activity.

Whereas the assumption of consumerism as the root cause of food waste is often reproduced in public and scholarly discussion, the cultural energy of resisting consumerist overflow has not been fully recognized. Taking seriously both the resistant character of responsibility and the fundamental role of resisting consumerist overflow deepens our understandings of food waste reduction and individual participation. Overall, approaching consumption through everyday tactics situated in personal projects opens new insights into political consumption. Particularly the intertwined dynamics between culturally constituted everyday tactics of resistance and the making of political consumers (e.g. in various cultural and political projects) appears as a fertile area of future research, in ethnology and beyond.

Liia-Maria Raippalinna
PhD student
University of Jyväskylä
PO Box 35
FI-40014 University of Jyväskylä
e-mail: liia.m.l.raippalinna@jyu.fi

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Notes

1 For a more profound discussion of strategies, see Andres et al. 2020.

2 The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The participants signed a consent form. In the article, interviewees' personal data are either changed or removed. Interviewees do not appear in the illustrations. Quotations have been translated from Finnish semi-verbatim.

3 In common language, consumerism is often related to consumer culture and consumer society. I use these terms interchangeably to refer to culture, society, or ideology framed by the capitalist economic system.

4 On voluntary dumpster diving as a "critical practice" see Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen 2021.

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