PART II

The Confédération Paysanne’s
Early Anti-GMO Campaign,
from Risk to Globalization
The Confédération Paysanne’s Approach to Direct Action

Breaking the “Violent Paysan” Stereotype
and Working Inside the System

A common sight on the French evening news is a group of farmers blockading a main highway by forming a train of trucks filled with potatoes. One often sees, towering before the blockade, an enormous smoldering pile of dripping, burning tires. When considering spectacles surrounding French farmers, most French viewers make no distinction between FNSEA and Confédération Paysanne farmers. This is largely because most French citizens have little awareness of the dominance of large-scale farmers and the diminished status of smallholders. For most French audiences watching the news, the image of the angry and desperate French farmer is a monolithic icon—a humorous yet pathetic caricature held lovingly, and regularly patronizingly, in the French imagination. Over the years, the Confédération Paysanne has worked to distinguish the Confédération Paysanne
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paysan from the notion of the “cute little peasant” petit paysan, promoted by the FNSEA. In the press, the FNSEA often uses the term paysan when describing members’ violent tactics such as burning stacks of tires in the middle of highways. By describing FNSEA activists as paysans, the FNSEA diverts attention away from the fact that the vast majority of FNSEA farmers are large-scale industrial growers. They also veil the machinations of power in which the FNSEA administration itself devises the destructive direct actions that they in turn blame on their own petit paysans (old-time) who, in reality, have little power or presence within the powerful union. Members of the new paysan movements have reclaimed the term paysan, redefining it in radical and prideful terms. According to many in the Confédération Paysanne, FNSEA farmers continue to regard themselves as modernist entrepreneurs, only invoking discourses on the paysan when seeking to garner sympathy from public bodies and audiences.

In popular French consciousness, paysans are generic, small-scale farmers who inhabit a rustic rural past, living in a world that no longer exists. The term paysan has both romantic and pejorative connotations, summoning up bucolic nostalgia as well as rural ignorance, crudeness, and isolation from the modern world. According to many Confédération Paysanne leaders, the FNSEA has always exploited popular understandings of the paysan, using the image of the romanticized old-time petit paysan to justify its tactics and to garner popular sympathy in the media (Basson 1997). The FNSEA is perceived as portraying petit paysans as casseurs (thugs) who destroys property to get their own way. According to the former Confédération Paysanne spokesperson François Dufour:

The FNSEA has always used “les petits paysans” [poor smallholders] in their demonstrations. They would put them in the front of the actions, so the media could see them and they would encourage them to break things, like to go to the prefecture of the police and to break public property. This way, the FNSEA tried to look like a union of old-time paysans that would get a lot of media attention and would also stimulate sympathy on the part of French citizens who see the paysans fighting to survive. The irony is that they used the paysans like this at the exact same time that they were trying to eliminate them from the union. They used them to get media and to portray themselves as paysans with whom citizens should feel solidarity. The message was, “You need the paysans; they’re here to feed you; support our struggle!” (Dufour, personal communication, April 11, 1998)
For many Confédération Paysanne farmers, such as the former national secretary Guy Le Fur, the Confédération Paysanne needs to challenge this distorted image of paysans. According to Le Fur, the Confédération Paysanne must actively work to transform the stereotype of the paysan as a casseur—a country bumpkin living outside society who comes to the city to cause a ruckus: “We need people to understand that we are not just people who want to break things. We are rational people trying to create a more intelligent approach to agriculture” (Le Fur, personal communication, October 27, 1997).

In an attempt to enhance the distinction between the FNSEA and the Confédération Paysanne, many members seek to avoid direct action that might be misperceived by the public as being aggressive and foolish. Instead, some in the union opt for a policymaking approach—one that entails working within government bodies to change them from inside. In the late 1990s there was a quiet but palpable tension between older and younger members of the Confédération Paysanne regarding political strategy. Purs porcs (farmers perceived as longtime committed farmers) who had come through the JAC movements preferred lobbying powerful institutions such as the ministry of agriculture. This policymaking approach ironically is not unlike that of the FNSEA, which works closely with government bodies and is continuously making alliances with politicians and industry agents who benefit the union. At the other end of the spectrum is the relatively young direct-action wing of the Confédération Paysanne, which, embracing the spirit of 1968 and the Larzac, favors nonviolent direct action. It is crucial to emphasize that these two wings are not monolithic and have considerable overlap; many Confédération Paysanne members are engaged in both lobbying and direct-action activity.

Many in the union seek to lobby the French government to break the FNSEA’s nearly exclusive role as the key consulting body within government forums. In 1990 the Confédération Paysanne won the right to sit on a limited number of commissions on farming policy at the local and national level as a result of a new governmental decree. In 1997 the Confédération Paysanne (along with all farmers’ unions) won full rights to be represented on farming policy bodies due to a law passed by the Socialist government (Bové 2001). These new rights allowed the Confédération Paysanne to participate in drafting new laws on farming, and it is increasingly consulted on major policies by the ministry of agriculture.
Among Confédération Paysanne members who promote direct action there is a general embracing of a nonviolent, Gandhian-influenced model of resistance. Many of them critique the FNSEA for historically using harsh or violent forms of direct action (e.g., the blockade incident). FNSEA direct actions frequently cause significant and costly property damage. On many occasions, FNSEA members have smashed large windows of government buildings or ransacked the ministry of agriculture offices, literally tossing office furniture out of windows and destroying filing systems by emptying their contents out the window as well.

Alternatively, the Confédération Paysanne promotes nonviolent direct actions, events that are often dripping with irony and media-ready symbolism. Many Confédération Paysanne actions entail creating a “farm of the future” on the site of an offending government or corporate body. Generally speaking, farms of the future require paysans to haul farm animals and large sacks of dirt and hay to a given site. After laying out the dirt and hay, union members set up model farms, usually in urban centers, to create an anachronistic, comical effect. Farms of the future often resemble little petting zoos with lambs or foals, and urban children have an opportunity to feed or touch the animals. Farms of the future almost always culminate with a picnic in which paysans spread out blankets upon which to enjoy a feast of artisanal breads, cheeses, wines, pâtés, and fruits brought from various regions of the country (Bové, personal communication, November 11, 1999). Such direct actions are intended to demonstrate what a postindustrial farm could look like.

I attended several farms of the future, but one stands out to me most. It took place a few blocks from my apartment in the 1st arrondissement of Paris in the fall of 1998. The union planned a conference focusing on the upcoming meeting of the European Commission on Agriculture—the body that creates what is called in France the Politique Agricole Common (Common Agricultural Policy). The policies issued by the commission are similar to those established by the U.S. farm bill.

This particular farm of the future was set up at the Place des Muses in the esplanade near Paris’s first American-style shopping mall, Le Forum des Halles. The location was symbolic. Since 1183, Les Halles had been Paris’s
largest central traditional market. It was demolished in 1971 to make way for an underground and aboveground modern pedestrian shopping mall. In its heyday before 1971, Les Halles was a shelter for the country’s national merchants traveling to Paris to sell their wares. People who remember Les Halles often speak nostalgically of enjoying its busy and bright atmosphere—usually in the early hours of the morning—after attending theater or the opera. Parisians wearing suits and gowns would dine at little stalls at Les Halles (set up primarily for working merchants) where they’d enjoy bowls of onion soup. All around, workers in the meat or poultry industry hung carcasses and prepared produce for the next day’s market. For centuries Les Halles was known as “the stomach of Paris.” Le Forum des Halles (the mall) is truly a postindustrial entity. Unable to compete in the new market economy based largely on supermarkets and the agro-foods industry, Les Halles was transformed into Le Forum des Halles just as the paysans were transformed into agriculteurs or disenfranchised smallholders. The Place des Muses, the center of the outdoor mall, features a set of sculptures and an ornate marble fountain. It is a site usually full of hip-looking students, tourists, and young people zooming around on skateboards. Others at the Place des Muses may loll along the wall of the fountain munching on hamburgers from McDonald’s or slowly licking scoops of ice cream from Ben and Jerry’s.

To attend the farm of the future, Confédération Paysanne members traveled from all over the country. As is often the case at such events, for many this trip represented their first excursion to Paris. Confédération Paysanne organizers set up a small tent by the fountain where a series of representatives of consumer, ecology, and farmers’ groups held small meetings on the implications of European agricultural policy for paysans. Outside the tent, across from the fountain, stood the union speaker François Dufour with his twelve-year-old daughter. Together they had traveled from Brittany to set up a farm of the future, complete with horse, goat, lamb, and chickens enclosed in a makeshift wooden fence. Along the surface of the concrete floor, Dufour and his daughter scattered bales of hay and several bags of soil. Amused passersby would stop and pet the animals, pose questions, and generally enjoy the strange ambiance of a small farm plopped in the middle of a Parisian square on a sunny October afternoon.

Other Confédération Paysanne members had set up a small, spontaneous farmers’ market to sell mostly farm-raised grilled lamb, cradled between rough pieces of homemade bread. These sandwiches were consumed
eagerly—mostly by Confédération Paysanne members attending the demonstration. These delicacies featured artisanal roasted lamb slapped between bread without garnishes. For my part, I tried to down my sandwich quickly while the delicious but greasy meat soaked straight through the bread. As I sat fumbling with my meal, a few older paysan men sat and watched me, laughing good-naturedly. In vain they tried to instruct me in the proper way of consuming the meal and avoiding a messy disaster.

One image stands out to me still. Outside the tent, sitting along the fountain, was a line of older paysans in their sixties or seventies, wearing woolen berets, heavy hand-knit sweaters, and rough-hewn workpants and shoes. The men sat along the wall, speaking in strong southern accents, passing back and forth golden baguettes, speckled tubes of homemade salami, wedges of cheese, and bottles of red wine in dark-green bottles. As the men reclined along the wall, they studied passersby in a bemused yet polite fashion, as if they were watching a strange but intriguing film. In turn, young Parisians skating by, with headphones and spiky hair, looked equally politely yet bewildered at the older men, as if they too were watching a fascinating film from another era. The scene reminded me of preindustrial paysans and postindustrial urban youths studying each other, as if trying to determine the answer to a historical riddle.

The idea of a farm of the future—a mainstay of the Confédération Paysanne’s demonstrations—emerged from the union’s desire to promote itself as a wholly modern organization with a forward-looking vision of agriculture. According to many Confédération Paysanne members, the union must distinguish itself from the fnsea’s large-scale industrial agriculture. In addition the union must also differentiate itself from romantic back-to-the-landers with whom union members do not identify. For paysans, such farmers represent a small-scale antimodern agriculture, one promoted by ecolos (slang for ecologists), “back-to-the-land hippies,” or right-wing smallholders. According to many in the union, these farmers tend to promote a politically reactionary and passéist (past-oriented) vision of agriculture that begs for a return to an idealized (and nonexistent) rural past.

The farm of the future serves two purposes. It attempts to “remind city dwellers that small farmers are here and haven’t gone away” (François Dufour, personal communication, April 16, 1998), and it also suggests that farmers can be modern and progressive while also promoting a model of agriculture that is safe, clean, and small enough in scale to allow for a robust
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and widely populated rural world (Guy Le Fur, personal communication, September 9, 1999). The Confédération Paysanne has thus staged several farms of the future in busy Parisian squares, or, on a few occasions, even (illegally) inside the walls of McDonald’s restaurants. Other times members of the Confédération Paysanne have brought livestock to symbolic sites of contestation, transporting sheep to Montparnasse, goats to Bercy, or chickens into the offices of government and corporate lending agencies. Once, when contesting government policy on milk production, the Confédération Paysanne led a cow first to the Louvre and then to the Museum National d’Histoire Naturelle (National Museum of Natural History). The goal of this tour was to “show Parisians that real cows do still exist—before they end up only in museums” (René Riesel, personal communication, October 12, 1998).

Paysans frequently refer to two Confédération Paysanne actions that specially emblemize Conf. sensibility. In April 1992, Confédération Paysanne members emptied a bag of chicken feathers on a top executive of the Pohlmann Corporation (a German industrial chicken producer). This action protested the construction of a massive chicken farm outside Paris (with more than five million chickens). It is worth noting that this feathering was symbolic. The feathers rested on the executive only long enough to snap a picture—union members did not tar him. After feathering the corporate agent, Confédération Paysanne national secretaries reclined on the grounds of the chicken farm to picnic and conduct a formal meeting of the national committee. At this gathering, the union demanded that the government create a law (that eventually passed) requiring producers of more than three hundred thousand chickens to attain preapproval by the town prefect before opening an operation that would put small poultry producers out of business (Basson 1997). Another memorable action took place in November 1996, when 250 paysans occupied the office of the director of the Association Générale des Producteurs de Blé et Autre Céréales (French General Association of Wheat and Grain Producers) in Paris. Paysans herded six cows into the office one by one and demanded that farm subsidies be brought back to levels set before the European Commission on Agriculture lowered them dramatically. There is an iconic Confédération Paysanne poster featuring this action. I spotted it in many Confédération Paysanne members’ homes and at the headquarters in Bagnolet. In the poster, government agricultural officials are seated wearing three-piece suits along one side of a table, as if in a press conference, and holding papers and notebooks. Standing across from the officials is a small
crowd of white and black Holstein cows. Across the top of the poster, an understated yet hilarious headline reads: “Visit to the Wheat and Grain Association” (Baudry 1997, 25).

With these types of actions the Confédération Paysanne demonstrates its ability to develop media-ready images that communicate a politically potent and entertaining message. The Confédération Paysanne regards its direct actions as nonviolent because they generally cause minimal or incidental property damage and are symbolic (and ironic) in nature. At worst, the actions cause degrees of humiliation for the symbolic heads of powerful institutions such as the Pohlmann executive. They tend to leave behind a bit of animal manure and straw, but Confédération Paysanne members are sure to remove it all at the end of the action.

EARLY CONFÉDÉRATION PAYSANNE CAMPAIGNS:
PAC, GATT, AND REFORMING FRENCH POLICY

In the 1990s, in addition to addressing the domestic problems of paysans, the Confédération Paysanne’s activism focused on reform of European agricultural policy and issues of free trade. Union members addressed issues of agricultural subsidies and burgeoning international discourses on food sovereignty that emerged in the late 1990s. In 1992, the newly reformed European Common Agricultural Policy intensified inequalities among European farmers, removing limits on farm subsidies to large-scale farmers. This policy led 85 percent of farm subsidies to be distributed among 20 percent of farmers (the large-scale ones) (Pochon 1997, 116). Confédération Paysanne activists protested these reforms, demanding at minimum a limit on subsidies received by large-scale farmers and a more just redistribution of farm-based aid.

Throughout the decade leaders of the Confédération Paysanne called for the European Common Agricultural Policy to include a production quantum, a limit to the aid each farm receives, regardless of size. This request was based on the fact that for decades bigger farms received more aid, destroying smallholders in the process. In addition, Confédération Paysanne farmers demanded a subsidy repartition that would allow for the existence of eight hundred thousand French farms instead of the tiny fraction of that number that now peppers the French countryside. Needless to say, that demand has yet to be met.

During this time, the Confédération Paysanne also challenged the Gen-
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eral Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, bolstering their claims about food by appealing to newly emerging discourses about the rights of local communities to determine their own agricultural policy. On December 4, 1993, union paysans joined eight thousand other smallholders from across Europe to travel to Geneva, carrying a banner that for the first time read *Souveraineté alimentaire* (Food sovereignty). Although the precise origin of the term is unclear, it began circulating through international smallholder forums in the early 1990s. It was formally adopted as a core principle in 1996 by La Via Campesina. What is fascinating about food sovereignty discourse is that it throws a wrench in trade-related food discourses that frame agriculture and its products as mere commodities. When viewed as a fungible commodity, the products of agriculture come under the jurisdiction of discourses of free trade, food risk, food safety, and food security. Departing from this instrumental rationality of agriculture that runs through these discourses, food sovereignty discourse is based on a solidaire rationality. Many of the world’s smallholders demanding food sovereignty seek the right of individual countries to determine their own food policy—while fighting neoliberalism in general (Holt-Gimenez and Peabody 2008).

Confédération Paysanne’s Agricultural Vision: Paysan Agriculture

*CONFÉDÉRATION PAYSANNE’S PROGRAM: PRODUCE, EMPLOY, AND PRESERVE*

The Confédération Paysanne’s agricultural program represents a distinctive elaboration of many of the values derived from the solidaire rationality that originated in discourse associated with the JAC. Again, paysans remaining within the FNSEA tended to identify with the instrumental rationality of a productivist and capital-driven agriculture. In contrast, founders of the new paysan movements and the Confédération Paysanne identified more with a solidaire rationality of agriculture. According to this vision, the Confédération Paysanne must promote a spirit of solidarity between all smallholders seeking to create a robust and solidarity-based rural world.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Confédération Paysanne printed its key slogan, “Produce, Employ, Preserve,” on all union pamphlets, stickers, banners, T-shirts, and posters. These three words represent the three prongs of the Confédération Paysanne’s program during this period. Each term in the slogan is framed in a square and paired with a particular image. *Produce* is illus-
trated with a field of grazing sheep, summoning an image of agricultural production that is small scale and pasture based, rather than an image associated with the industrial feedlot. The Confédération Paysanne’s insistence on production reflects the union’s belief that there is still a need for a small farmer who not only gardens the landscape, preparing an appealing countryside for passing tourists, but also a paysan who produces food for citizens. The Confédération Paysanne’s programs attempt to reverse the productivist trend by restructuring the rural world based on a postindustrial model: a rural zone overflowing with robust small-scale farms. The image accompanying employ is a circle of women and men holding hands, symbolizing solidarity among paysans as workers struggling to establish farming as a viable option for all paysans. Here we see an insistence not only on production—growing food as an end in itself—but also on wage-earning employment, the right to use one’s talents and skills to earn a livable wage. The term preserve depicts a childlike drawing of clouds, trees, and hills surrounding a bucolic farm. It is worth noting that the Confédération Paysanne portrays preservation in a way that diverges from many non-French environmental understandings of conserving wildlife or wilderness by protecting it from human activity. Here the paysan preserves the countryside by knowing, caring, and transforming land into a productive and meaningful landscape. The idea of nature as agriculture has specific meaning in the French context. Through words and images, the Confédération Paysanne establishes the paysan as producer and manager of the rural economy—as well as steward of the countryside whose cultural expertise preserves the land for future generations.

PAYSAN AGRICULTURE: MODERN AND SOLIDAIRE

The terms employ, produce, and preserve are also incorporated into the union’s agricultural vision, known as Paysan Agriculture. At the union’s founding meeting in Rennes in 1987, the Confédération Paysanne presented this vision, calling it “a necessity for a society that is both modern and based on solidarity” (Aubineau 1997, 107). The Confédération Paysanne links together what Raymond Williams calls keywords (1976), such as modern and solidarité. In bringing these words together, the union discursively established a notion of rural solidarity that is progressive rather than antimodern. Like the farm of the future, the union’s idea of Paysan Agriculture implies a forward-looking model of agriculture that produces food while also sup-
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porting the lifestyles of other worker-identified smallholders in France and around the world.

Between 1987 and 1998, the Confédération Paysanne refined the definition of Paysan Agriculture, presenting it again in December 1998 in the form of a public document that can be found on the union’s website, “L’agriculture paysanne: Une agriculture qui respecte le paysan et répond aux attentes de la société. Charter Agricole qui respecte le paysan et répond aux attentes de la société” (Agriculture Paysanne That Respects the Farmer and Meets the Needs of Society). This charter assumes the form of ten principles. Each principle represents the Confédération Paysanne’s public rejection of policies related to European agriculture policy as well as those promoted by free-trade agreements. The following principles, promoted by the union, advance an alternative model to industrial farming and the agro-foods industry.

**TEN PRINCIPLES OF PAYSAN AGRICULTURE**

1. Providing production and distribution that allow for the maximum number to work as farmers, earning a viable income.
2. Forging solidarity with farmers in Europe and throughout the rest of the world.
3. Respecting nature by ensuring its use by future generations.
4. Promoting diligent use of rare resources.
5. Providing transparency in all relations of purchasing, production, processing, and sale of agricultural produce.
6. Ensuring the good quality, taste, and safety of produce.
7. Providing farmers’ maximum autonomy.
8. Forming partnerships with others living in the countryside.
9. Maintaining the diversity of animals, plants, and land for both historic and economic reasons.
10. Being mindful of the long-term and global context. (My translation)

In the Ten Principles of Paysan Agriculture there is a solidaire rationality of agriculture that is traceable to the JAC and new paysan movements. Half of the principles (numbers 1, 2, 7, 8, 10) are drawn from such values as the right to work, international solidarity, autonomy from corporate and capitalist control, solidarity (and potential coalition) with other nonpaysan rural groups, and a concern for future generations and the world at large. These five principles articulate the Confédération Paysanne’s aim to establish
agriculture as a distinctly social and political activity. For the Confédération Paysanne, notions of agriculture must be understood in the context of human rights and social solidarity. Paysan Agriculture even reaches beyond the domain of farming to touch on issues of justice regarding the need to restore the vitality of rural life. The union’s emphasis on both futurism and internationalism distinguishes it from parochial ruralist organizations that are antimodern, antiprogress, regionalist, or nationalist.

PAYSAN AGRICULTURE VERSUS SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

The ten key principles of Paysan Agriculture reflect a divergence from other alternative agricultural discourses such as those on sustainable or organic agriculture. When related to foodstuffs, the terms sustainable and organic tend to emphasize the degree to which agricultural production methods are chemicalized and thus potentially harmful to peoples and environments. Questions of production scale (farm size), farm wages, or quality of life for people living and working in agrarian areas are largely ignored in sustainable and organic discourses on agriculture. For decades, the Confédération Paysanne has been committed to developing and promoting its own distinctive vision of agriculture. According to several of the Confédération Paysanne leaders I interviewed, the term sustainable agriculture (agriculture soutenable) is not a “French idea.” Many Confédération Paysanne members went as far as rejecting the term soutenable because it was simply a direct translation of an English term that couldn’t be accurately translated to French. As such, it “could not relate to the specific situation and concerns of French paysans” (François Dufour, personal communication, April 11, 1998). If pushed to use the term, Confédération Paysanne members attempted to put a French spin on it, coining phrases such as agriculture durable (durable agriculture) or agriculture raisonable (sensible agriculture). As one Confédération Paysanne leader said to me, “What is sustainable agriculture? No one really knows. It’s very unclear at times and does not always include the social and political element. We need our own term to describe our own vision. The term agriculture durable is better than agriculture soutenable. But neither has precise meaning for our cause.” The fnsea uses the term agriculture durable to fit into the Anglophone framework. Many Confédération Paysanne members think both terms, durable and soutenable, were coined by those in non-French, specifically Anglo-dominated, contexts. Union members seemed wary of joining a perceived inchoate chorus of actors asking for different
and even contradictory visions about what an alternative agriculture would be. In contrast, Paysan Agriculture offers union members an inimitable contribution to international discussions about agriculture, one that carves out a definition that cannot be contained under the rubric of sustainability (Andre Serat, personal communication, November 18, 2000).

An interesting finding: The Confédération Paysanne website as of 2012 features a significant archive of press releases, articles, and other Confédération Paysanne–related texts. When I did a search for “agriculture sustainable,” only four links appeared. When I punched in “agriculture durable,” I found seventy-three links. When I entered “agriculture paysanne,” 384 links sprang out before me, indicating the relevance and meaning of the term within relation to the union’s vision and goals.

Discourses on sustainable agriculture do indeed have a special history, quite distinct from the Confédération Paysanne’s discourses on agriculture that emerge from the new paysan movements. While it is not in the scope of this book to untangle the complex and multifaceted history of notions of sustainability, it is worth noting that sustainable development or sustainable agriculture are keywords. As Williams suggests, such keywords are endowed with uncommon histories and objectives. In addition to reflecting new understandings of land, people, food, and nature, they also constitute new understandings and practices through their own networks of usage (Williams 1976). The keyword sustainability emerges in the early 1980s as a way to talk about stemming the tide of ecological breakdown in the Global South. Discourses on sustainable development were first cited in a formal document in 1983 by the Bruntland Commission, a team of advisors to the United Nations considering increasing problems of global resource depletion and environmental degradation. While many people today associate sustainability discourse with grassroots local movements, it is worth noting its historical ties to agents within powerful institutions. According to Arturo Escobar, discourses about sustainability were heavily promoted by northern nongovernmental organizations in the early 1990s (Escobar 1996, 52). While such organizations strove to address problems associated with the industrialization of the Global South, they also played a role in legitimizing and actually sustaining capitalist practices (Escobar 1996a). For Escobar, discourses and practices surrounding “sustainability” represent a “reinvention of nature as environment” that allows capital, rather than nature, to be sustained (1996a, 49). Corporate and regulatory agencies seeking to protect nature from un-
sustainable practices often end up protecting the very capitalist system that destroys lands and peoples. For Escobar, sustainability discourse colonizes lands, species, and people according to an instrumental logic, rendering them “efficient” for the advanced capitalization of nature (see Escobar 1992, 2002, 2005).

**PA ysAN AGRICULTURE VERSUS ORGANIC AGRICULTURE**

It is crucial to note here that the “nature” invoked through Paysan Agriculture is quite different from the instrumentalized nature-as-environmental-resource suggested by much of sustainability or organic discourse. Within the logic of paysan agriculture, the idea of nature is inseparable from the solidaire rationality extended to peoples and cultures associated with particular agricultural zones. Out of the ten key principles, just a third actually invoke the term *nature*. However, here nature represents a rationality that expresses solidarity with future generations. The other more indirect reference to nature (the ninth principle) represents a call to maintain diversity of animal and plant species for distinctly social reasons that were determined “historic” and “economic.”

The Confédération Paysanne’s idea of nature as agriculture does not poise nature against the idea of society. For the Confédération Paysanne, agriculture is a form of nature, a domain of work within a larger sociopolitical context. Confédération Paysanne discourse puts an unusual spin on the Western town-country dichotomy locked firmly into the popular imagination. For the Confédération Paysanne, agriculture is a domain equally imprinted by discourses of work and class, continuous with labor movements associated with the urban world. In its emphasis on production scale, Paysan Agriculture is also distinct from notions of organic agriculture, which have a different history. The term *organic agriculture* first grew to prominence within Northern Europe in the nineteenth century, later resurfacing in the 1960s as part of the back-to-the-land counterculture in the United States. As Michael Pollan points out, U.S.-based organic movements of the 1960s and 1970s (which later spread to Europe) suggested a more holistic societal vision (Pollan 2006, 141). We could say they were grounded in a solidaire rather than instrumental rationality. The sensibility originally associated with organic agriculture was one that rejected big business and consumer capitalism (associated with junk food) and sought an alternative, more community-based and rural lifestyle that would accompany an alternative food system.
In 1998, when the USDA created federal standards for organic farmers, it instrumentalized organic agriculture, reducing it to a set of technical criteria that could be easily operationalized by large industrial growers as annexes to their nonorganic enterprises. “Big organics” has become the fastest-growing sector in the agricultural market internationally (Pollan 2006, 158). Today, two large-scale organic producers generate close to 90 percent of all organic produce grown in the United States. Once again, large-scale agriculture crowds out small-scale growers, “even” in the domain of organics. The Confédération Paysanne, however, did not necessarily anticipate the co-optation of organics by large-scale agribusiness. At a meeting of the national committee at the Confédération Paysanne in 1999, I mentioned that organic agriculture was on the verge of being appropriated, or overtaken, by large-scale industrial growers in the United States. Everyone in the room looked at me with disbelief, laughing and shaking their heads. “Why should we be surprised?” asked one of the national secretaries, as he took a sip of coffee from a small, thick mug. “They’ll take everything they can.”

The Confédération Paysanne emphasizes production scale, so the union has never regarded organic production methods as a necessary component of Paysan Agriculture. As a social rather than environmental or technical concept, concern for agricultural scale is an expression of social solidarity; it reflects a collective desire to increase the overall number of farmers able to be employed in a given region or country. According to most union members, proponents of organic or sustainable agriculture fail to recognize issues of scale as a social as well as ecological issue. According to Dufour, the French government bases subsidies on the number of farm acres or workers. In so doing, it penalizes farmers with limited acreage and a small family workforce. It is this lack of concern for small-scale farmers that has led to a situation in which 50 percent of paysan husbands or wives work off the farm. Needing additional income to survive, farm families work in factories, drive buses, or work in retail. If lucky, each family can afford to support one full-time worker on the farm (François Dufour, personal communication, October 12, 1998). For Dufour, the smaller the size of the average French farm, the greater the number of individuals able to farm and receive aid. Dufour reflects, “Big farms take all of the aid and make it impossible for small farms to survive.” As the Confédération Paysanne member André Aubineau writes in his brief history of the Confédération Paysanne, “There are those, on modestly sized farms, who decide to remain small in order to respect their neigh-
bor, in order to allow young farmers to set up new farms for themselves” (1997, 107). Once again, the Confédération Paysanne represents a sharp departure from other alternative agriculture models in Europe or the United States that promote organic agriculture as the primary alternative to productivist farming. In fact, only a minority of Confédération Paysanne farmers use organic farming methods. While many regard it as too expensive and impractical, others view it as a bourgeois endeavor, focusing instead on the broader social context surrounding small-scale farming.

In France, debates about food are framed by paysans in primarily agricultural terms. In contrast, in the United Kingdom, Northern Europe, the United States, and Australia, consumer-driven ecology groups primarily rally the cause. The emergence of Confédération Paysanne farmers as key symbols for postindustrial agriculture (and the anti-gmo movement) is linked to local understandings of nature, culture, and agriculture.

**No Nature, Just Culture: The French Case**

Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has contributed significantly to our understanding of nature as an idea that is constructed in particular ways by specific peoples. In her canonic essay “No Nature, No Culture: The Hagen Case” (1980), Strathern explores the nature-culture binary as a distinctive Western way of organizing reality. Challenging structuralist notions of nature and culture as a universal (and gendered) binary, Strathern’s crosscultural study of the Hagen peoples of Papua New Guinea demonstrates the extent to which the nature-culture dualism, as well as discrete notions of nature and culture, is a distinctly Western configuration.

In my research, I have found France to be home to a distinctive nature-culture framework. In combing through the considerable international literature on food quality, an interesting pattern emerges: Actors in Britain, Northern Europe, and Australia tend to frame gmos as unnatural. In contrast, French actors tend to reject gmos as noncultural.

In determining gmos as noncultural, French actors presented an unusual configuration between nature and culture that departs from the classical Western nature-culture dualism. Yet before I further explore notions of a “French nature,” a caveat is necessary: there is no monolithic French understanding of nature and culture. As a country composed of multiple subcultures, regions, and dialects, French understandings of nature are complex and uneven. Keeping this complexity in mind, it is still useful to point to a
trend in France to construct notions of nature and culture in a unique way. French understandings of nature revolve around two primary Western approaches to ordering the nature-culture binary. First, the nature-culture binary is grounded in notions of nature as presocial rather than social. Second, the nature-culture binary is based on the idea of culture as either essential or processual.

Again, the nature-culture dualism is indeed a Western construct organized in two primary ways, presocial and social. Many in the West posit nature in opposition to culture, but others in the West construct nature in more social terms. In the latter case, nature stands in historical continuity with culture, as the two ideas are linked together in the idea of agriculture. For example, German romanticism of nature in the nineteenth century portrays nature in presocial terms, as wild and pristine in association with untouched areas (such as the Black Forest in Germany or the American wilderness). In contrast, French romanticism of nature tends to portray nature as *le terroir*. The untranslatable term *terroir* signifies in France a unique agricultural area that has distinctive soil and weather conducive to producing particular food or potables (Morgan, Mardsen, and Murdock 2006). In le terroir, meteorological and biological features of particular land areas are interwoven with the savoir faire of the artisanal producers to create, for instance, Roquefort cheese or Champagne.

In the German case, while Western notions of a wild or presocial nature percolated throughout the colonial period, they were taken to a new ideological level in the nineteenth-century nature romanticism of Germanic theorists such as Ernst Moritz Arndt and Ernst Haekel. In 1815, Arndt published *On the Care and Conservation of Forests*, which condemned deforestation associated with dawning industrial practice, calling for a harmonization between nature and culture that could be achieved by recognizing nature’s “connectedness” (Staudenmaier 1995, 6). Decades later, in 1868, the zoologist Ernst Haekel coined the term *ecology*. In his book *The History of Creation*, Haekel describes ecology as the study of a nature deemed pure and primordial (Haekel 1868). For Haekel, ecology and nature were defined in opposition to society, which he regarded as inherently foreign, corruptive, and degrading (Mosse 1964, 29).

Unlike Germanic associations between a presocial nature and a primordial national identity, France tends to associate a presocial nature with that which is not French. For most French people, the idea of nature as wilder-
ness signals a romanticized idea of that which is exogenous and exotic. In nearly every interview I conducted with actors in a variety of forums, narratives of wild nature (nature sauvage) did not refer to the French territory. Rather, wild nature was what led actors who could afford it to visit places and peoples in France’s French-speaking former colonies, such as Cameroon and Senegal, or the colonized worlds of the United States or Australia. When speaking of nature in the French context, actors invoked romantic notions of spaces associated with traditional agricultural practice. This social understanding of nature represents an implicit collective recognition of what the theorist Neil Smith refers to as the social production of nature (1996, 49), the socialization of nature through human activity or labor. For many French people, going back to nature means returning to a particular agricultural region (terroir), returning to one’s rural or agricultural roots (Hervieu 1996b). Today, many people in France continue to own a small country home inherited from agrarian grandparents or other relatives. For those who do not have country homes, many participate in France’s well-established agrotourist industry, visiting country inns (gîtes) that allow French tourists to “commune” with their rural pasts (real and imagined).

In my discussions with actors regarding the French anti-GMO movement, they would often appeal to reified notions of a “French nature” in their attempts to explain why the ecology movement is less prominent in France than in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Similarly, they would explain why French people have a special relationship with food or agriculture. For Pascal R., a key researcher at France’s Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (National Institute of Agricultural Research), the question of ecology is different in France because of France’s lack of nature:

You see, there is no nature in France. There are still some valleys, some ravines, and a few forests, but they are quite small, just a few hectares. The environment in France is a product of systems of human practice and so you can’t treat the environmental question like you can in other countries, the Anglo-Saxon countries. The ecologists have to see nature in a different way. When they see a wild plant, for instance, they understand that behind this plant is a farmer, and the conditions in which this plant will live is a system of relationships between farmers, the government, and what happens on the European level, in Brussels. (Pascal R., personal communication, September 25, 1999)
If nature means a presocial wilderness, then France has none. In interactions with farmers throughout the country, I found so many who took pride in explaining to me how every inch of the countryside is fully used and made productive. On several occasions farmers who had heard of U.S. farming—where there are large areas of unused land surrounding farm plots—took great pleasure in bringing me to the edge of one of their fields to show how the field was cultivated right out to the road. “No room for nature here!” exclaimed one union paysan from Normandy, pointing to the tidy edge of his field of sugar beets growing nearly flush with the roadside. “You might have room to spare over in the Midwest, there,” he said. “But here, we use every inch of nature that we can.”

While French notions of nature are deeply social, they are also processual rather than essentialist. Once again, the dividing line tends to fall between French and Germanic ways of constructing the nature-culture dualism. In the West there are two primary understandings of culture, one based on the Germanic notion of culture as *Kultur* (inherited essence), and one on the French notion of culture as process (*cultiver*) (Pandian 1985, 30). French understandings of culture as *cultiver* find their origins in the preclassical Latin term *cultus*, which has two meanings, one material and one semiotic. On the one hand, cultus refers to the cultivation of the material or biological world. *Culture* is the term both for an agricultural crop and for the microorganisms used in the fermentation process required for making cheese and wine. On the other hand, cultus implies the idea of developing cultural knowledge. To be cultured is to be cultivated. It means one has developed an appreciation of cultivated things, such as French wine, cheese, literature, or philosophy. In turn, the eighteenth-century French notion of civilization, derived from the Latin *civis* or *civilitas*, is linked to the idea of *cultiver*, to the idea of modern progress as a universal process of development. Rather than constitute a national or cultural essence, civilization represents a developmental process, a model of upward mobility constituted by stages of human development (Pandian 1985). French understandings of nature and culture represent a distinctive understanding of the Western nature-culture dualism. Instead of there existing a fundamental tension between nature and culture, the two categories are understood as two dimensions of one continuous process of development that entails the nurturing of both material and semiotic worlds. Again, instead of a binary between nature and culture, France
is marked by a binary between culture and nonculture, between people and things that are cultivated and not cultivated.

**PAYSAN AGRICULTURE AND NEW DISCOURSES ON ENVIRONMENT: AGRO-ENVIRONMENT AND EUROPEAN AGRICULTURAL POLICY**

Even though the Confédération Paysanne does not rely heavily on romanticized notions of nature, the way that the union relates to politically charged discourses on nature is significant. The Confédération Paysanne’s invocation of the keywords *nature*, *rare resources*, and *diversity* (principles 3, 4, and 9) reflects its attempts to enter international environmental forums that became increasingly salient in Europe and internationally during the 1990s (Gupta 1998). During this time French, European, and international environmental forums began to calculate the environmental implications of postwar intensive agriculture. Consequently, they began to produce new sets of meanings and practices that have had significant implications for the rural role of paysans.

On the European level, the Common Agricultural Policy engendered new norms related to nature and environment that greatly affected paysans. European policies emerged that attempted to engage paysans in maintaining the resources and infrastructure of rural areas. European-driven subsidies encouraged paysans to engage in such projects as improving problems related to rural water pollution or helping to restore deforested and poorly maintained areas that were increasingly vulnerable to natural disasters (e.g., fires). Perhaps most significant, European policies surfaced that attempted to persuade paysans to address the decreasing aesthetic tourist appeal of the French countryside (Perigord 1996, 37). By introducing the category of “agro-environment,” the EU launched three hundred new rural development projects in sustainable development, giving priority to projects that supported a “diversified countryside,” one that restores traditional forms of agriculture such as Provençal terraces and animal husbandry in the mid-mountain region. Such agro-environment projects reflected the EU’s hopes to increase the aesthetic as well as environmental robustness of rural domains that had become increasingly depopulated and left in a state of disrepair.

On the French level, the General Directive No. VI implemented European agro-environmental policies, offering paysans subsidies for planting environmentally appealing crops, such as sunflowers, and raising livestock more extensively and in a more spacious manner. In addition, paysans began to
receive government subsidies for engaging in agricultural restoration of the nation’s rural heritage (*patrimoine rural*) by planting trees, managing ponds and streams, and restoring old bridges, fences, small historical churches, and walls (Perigord 1996, 37).

In 2005, I was visiting a Confédération Paysanne family in southern France when sunflowers were in full bloom. I was contentedly riding shotgun next to Marcel L., a Confédération Paysanne member and descendant from a long line of small farmers who had at one time farmed a diversified set of crops. As I looked out over the dazzling fields, I waxed poetic about the endless acres of brilliant swaying sunflowers. “You think this is beautiful?” Marcel asked me, horrified. “Don’t you?” I responded, embarrassed at what had clearly been a faux pas. “When I look at a field of sunflowers,” Marcel continued, “all I see is a European policy gone wrong, an EU policy that pays paysans to grow fields of pretty flowers for tourists, rather than food. We get extra points for ‘environmental beautification,’ extra subsidy monies for planting fields full of sunflowers.” As the rural sociologist Bertrand Hervieu suggests, the idea of countryside is important not only to foreign tourists but to French citizens themselves who, particularly since the postwar era, have stepped up a romantic and idealized desire for an attractive rural sphere. A poll from 1994 found that French citizens strongly supported the idea of subsidizing French farmers for maintaining “the aesthetic value” of French rural areas (Hervieu 1996a, 23).

While intensive farmers are in charge of large-scale production, paysans are increasingly (yet still minimally) subsidized for maintaining a countryside that is appealing to tourists (Hervieu 1996b, 7). Many founders of the Confédération Paysanne have conflicting sentiments regarding agro-environmental policies. While many embrace beautification subsidies as a necessary source of revenue in a competitive agricultural economy, others regard them as a government maneuver to further marginalize paysans, trivializing their political goals while transforming them from active producers to gardeners (*jardinières*) who work practically for free.

**Multifunctionality and Consumer Quality:**
**New Confédération Paysanne Objectives?**

Many founding members of the Confédération Paysanne contest the reduction of the small-scale farmer to a gardener and maintenance crew member for the tourist-oriented countryside. In turn they have a profound
distaste for the “multifunctionality concept”—the promotion by political bodies of the diversification of rural tasks and practices beyond the domain of food production. While multifunctionality also means practices of “adding value” to farm products such as milk or meat by producing artisanal cheeses and pâtés, the notion of subsidized rural restoration and stewardship is also central to multifunctionality.

The ten principles of Paysan Agriculture reflect the union’s attempt to address questions of multifunctionality. In the ten principles, we see environmentally oriented keywords such as nature, rare resources, and diversity. In using these keywords, the union expresses its ambivalent desire to establish itself as a powerful conduit of French and European agricultural policy.

In addition to the ten principles of Paysan Agriculture, the charter has a section that specifically refers to multifunctionality. For instance, the section “Farming to Serve Society” concludes with the statement “To respond to the needs [of society], farming produces two types of goods: commercial goods such as foodstuffs and noncommercial entities including the environment and landscape.” The Confédération Paysanne’s decision to distinguish between “two types of goods” signals a slight shift in discourse from the union’s earlier emphasis on rights to production and fair wages. While Confédération Paysanne literature frames this new role of stewardship as essential to its overall environmental vision, many within the union still have a cynical view of the multifunctionality idea. The former Confédération Paysanne national secretary Réné Riesel, in particular, speaks quite candidly about what he calls the “museumification” of the paysan who “plays the multifunctionality game by becoming a little showpiece in the countryside” (Riesel, personal communication, October 17, 1999). For Riesel, paysans in the union are often too willing to participate in European agri-environmental policy, becoming “gardeners rather than farmers, failing to truly fight industrial agriculture and capitalism.” But there are other Confédération Paysanne farmers who see multifunctionality as a necessary means to sustain paysans until a different European policy can be created that will restore the real role of the paysan—to produce.

In addition to incorporating discourses on multifunctionality, the charter also conjures consumer-oriented discourses on food quality. Out of the ten principles, two (numbers 5 and 6) address consumer concerns such as transparency and quality in the production process. The keyword transparency (principle 5) is often found in politicized circles. By the 1990s, the term
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(clustered together with quality and safety) had become a keyword in governmental, consumer, scientific, and corporate circles during the food scares associated with productivist agriculture crises that began in the 1970s with the first hormone-treated veal affair and continue today in crises surrounding hormone-treated beef, mad cow, and GMOs. Transparency became the symbol of a food-production chain that was visible and traceable, and one in which consumers could receive plain and honest communication. The inclusion of the term transparency in the ten key principles (as well as in general Confédération Paysanne consumer-oriented discourse used in the press) conveys the union’s tactical decision to align paysan discourses with those of consumer groups.

Conclusion

Carving out a new rationality of activism, production, and quality of food and life proved challenging for the Confédération Paysanne during its first decade. The union has always had a distinct activist style, and it achieved its goal of creating Paysan Agriculture as a model of a postindustrial agriculture that offers more than organic or sustainable agriculture while remaining an alternative to the industrial agricultural model. The union is not a monolithic entity. It is full of heterogeneous sets of objectives and strategies. While one tendency is more reformist in nature, seeking to use policymaking bodies as a primary site for social change, another wing of the union draws from a tradition of Gandhian-influenced nonviolence and direct action. The direct-action styles within the union are generally amusing, symbolic, and highly creative.

Paysan Agriculture is the central node within the union’s broader vision where nearly all actors’ objectives converge. Paysan Agriculture constitutes an alternative postindustrial response to the industrial model, establishing more solidaire production rationality. Whereas Paysan Agriculture generally offers a solid and clear set of principles, the union’s stance in regard to issues of multifunctionality and ideas of transparency remains ambiguous. Discourses on multifunctionality allow the union to indirectly assert a culturally acceptable rationality for its own existence within an agricultural system that otherwise regards smallholders as expendable.