Food, Farms, and Solidarity

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The Trial of the gmos

*Deploying Discourses from Risk to Globalization*

The Confédération Paysanne’s anti-gmo campaign is a story of an alternate production rationality that gained ascendancy within a debate about food and agriculture. It is an account about how this alternate rationality represents a counterhegemony that opened a space for a solidaire as well as an instrumental rationality of agriculture and science. Actors in the Confédération Paysanne began to speak more publicly about gmos, venturing increasingly outside the dominant discourse of risk. Their success in popularizing a solidaire rationality is linked to a kind of cultural clout the union was able to cultivate that established its members as paysans rather than scientific experts within the broader anti-gmo network. The Confédération Paysanne’s first major anti-gmo direct action, The Trial of the gmos, gained José Bové and the union public attention and credibility sufficient to popularize an alter-globalization perspective to advance a broader solidaire rationality of agriculture in the public domain.
Key figures in the Confédération Paysanne, such as Guy Le Fur, emphasized a lobbying approach, choosing to reform existing political bodies to inform agricultural policy. While Bové and René Riesel commended Le Fur’s triumphs, they add a complementary approach to achieving the union’s objectives. By promoting a direct-action strategy, these leaders drew from the Confédération Paysanne’s roots in Paysans-Travailleurs, the strike of May 1968, and the Larzac. The union was never split into two camps, though. Bové even joined Le Fur’s research team in preparing the report for the Conseil Économique et Sociale. Bové appreciated the symbolic meaning of the project, and he went to great lengths to research and to provide information to Le Fur regarding GMOs’ relevance to French agriculture. By the same token, union leaders unanimously decided to publicly and financially support the direct actions spearheaded by Riesel and Bové as they unfolded after January 1998. Even when expressing concerns about reinforcing the image of paysans as casseurs, the union stood by its members when they took a direct-action approach.

The Confédération Paysanne’s direct-action campaign began in January 1998 in the southern town of Nérac. The campaign continued through the spring of 1999 in a series of “crop pulls,” culminating in an anti-McDonald’s action headed up by Bové in August 1999. Bové and Riesel eventually parted ways over ideological differences at the end of that year. But for a period of time, these two potent personalities played a major role in putting into place an alter-globalization critique of GMOs that would eventually influence not only the activist terrain in France but the international arena as well. The two activists share much in common. Bové and Riesel, both *néo-ruraux* (those born outside the paysan world), were influenced by the events of May 1968. Then they turned to the farming life in their youth after being alienated by French postwar political and economic culture. For Bové, his dissatisfaction with French society originally stemmed from a rejection of militarism. For Riesel, the culture of consumer capitalism engendered a kind of cultural emptiness associated with late-modern society (Polanyi 1957; Polanyi and Pearson 1977). For both actors, the paysan identity represented an attempt to build a more meaningful way of life. Rural living provided a potent vantage point from which to understand and change the world.
René Riesel: Situationist Paysan

I first met Riesel in February 1998 at the Confédération Paysanne’s headquarters during his last days as a national secretary. I had heard a lot about Riesel at the union. Mostly I had been impressed with discussions regarding his intense political conviction, fierce intelligence, and passionate personality. Riesel agreed to an interview, and sat across from me at a table at union headquarters, chain-smoking hand-rolled cigarettes. His speech was rapid-fire, tinged with a southern accent. Riesel rattled off paragraphs, rather than sentences; he was so immersed in his own narrative that he barely made eye contact. I was impressed by what I perceived as a roiling set of contradictions. Riesel was humorous and ironic—yet dead serious in his conviction on political matters. He had a warm and engaging smile, but also a darting fervent look as he delivered stories about his life or about his critiques of the union. While firmly committed to the union, he also criticized it for not pushing its goals far enough.

At the time of the interview, Riesel was a short muscular man in his late forties with a ruddy complexion and sporting a goatee and roughly shorn jet-black hair. He was usually dressed in old jeans, hand-knit sweaters, and a pair of worn leather clogs. Riesel was constantly in the process of either rolling, lighting, or extinguishing a cigarette. He was born in Algiers in 1950 and is the son of Jewish immigrants. His mother, a Sephardic Jew, was raised in Algeria, while his father grew up under the Austro-Hungarian Empire and became a watchmaker and jeweler. Riesel’s father was a communist, nurturing in Riesel a critique of the capitalist system. Riesel’s father met his wife after moving to Algeria in the early 1940s, seeking asylum from Hungary’s increasingly anti-Semitic political climate. After the Algerian war, when Riesel was twelve, the family moved to Paris, where Riesel attended high school for a brief time. He recalls being teased for being an Arab. He was often the target of ethnic epithets, being called a pied noir, a pejorative and racist French slang term for Algerians that suggests they are people with black or dirty feet. When recalling the insults, he smiled wryly, saying, “What do you want? Of course I was happy when kids didn’t see me as truly French. I hated the French.” At sixteen, Riesel became increasingly disillusioned with public school. He dropped out and was drawn toward various anarchist and communist circles. It was then that he began a lifelong engagement with revolutionary ideas and the communist movement. After
participating in the Congres Anarchiste (Anarchist Congress) in 1967, Riesel briefly attended the University de Nanterre. At that time, Nanterre was a cultural and political center that wildly excited Riesel.

At Nanterre, in the spring of 1968, Riesel broke with the Communist Party and became the youngest member of the infamous anarchist group Les Enragés (The Enraged Ones). Les Enragés was a small but powerful group of five activists who banded together with the Situationist Internationale (Situationist International), an even more powerful group of anarchists who developed an avant-garde critique of postwar consumer-capitalist France. Building on the philosophy of Guy Debord, the Situationist Internationale members saw their mission as helping French society discover the spectacular abomination that postwar France had become. For Debord, “spectacular society” was forged out of notions of progress and modernity, ideas that translated into forms of modern technology, architecture, consumer capitalism, entertainment, and the media. According to Debord, under late capitalism, “The Spectacle” comes to increasingly dominate the sociocultural landscape and reduces humanity to a passive consumer and viewer of the machinations of capitalist society itself (Plant 1992). To put an end to the meaningless spectacle of society, the Situationist Internationale members created counterspectacles in churches, classrooms, sidewalks, and cafés through street theater, graffiti, and art installations in city squares. The sensibility was often absurd. A man and woman might lie down naked inside a public fountain, imitating its nude sculpted classical figures. Or they might paint sayings like “L’université, c’est la peinture,” “University is paint,” across the walls of an old university building. Together, the Situationist Internationale and Les Enragés were responsible for providing much of the sensibility, aesthetics, and theory behind the events of May 1968 (Plant 1992, 73).

Riesel was soon elected president of the Committee de L’Occupation de la Sorbonne (Occupation Committee of the Sorbonne) on May 14, 1968. This committee was charged with overseeing the ongoing occupation of the Sorbonne by students, workers, and others involved in the May events. One month later, he joined the Situationist Internationale, becoming a fervent member until his exclusion in 1971. When reflecting on his time in the group, he laughed, recalling, “What was truly great about the Situationist organization is that eventually, everyone was expelled — just the way the communists expelled their members. We even sent letters to people who were never even members of the Situationists, informing them of their expulsion.”
In contrast to the authoritarianism of the Communist Party and scientific Marxism, Les Enragés and Situationist Internationale emphasized free association, nonorganization, and artistic and “libidinal self-expression” as antidotes to the perceived lifelessness of a highly consumerist society (Plant 1992, 75). The revolution, they believed, would be fought spontaneously as workers, students, and everyday people realized what a boring spectacle postwar society had become (Debord 1967). During the major strikes and demonstrations of May 1968, Les Enragés and Situationist Internationale helped shape the mass mobilization of workers and students who, in an unprecedented alliance, called for a set of major reforms in such domains as factories, retail stores, and universities. Even though May 1968 was marked by sets of material demands, the events were distinct because they incorporated earlier psychological and aesthetic movements such as surrealism, Dadaism, and Freudianism, forming a potent activist cocktail. Both groups encouraged creative acts of spontaneity such as writing poetry on factory and university walls, occupying theaters for sites of debate, and constructing street barricades out of pillows and couches while prancing around the streets in fanciful costumes.

When I asked him about his current political identity, Riesel recalled that while his ideas had matured over the years, he still mostly identified as a Situationist. “If I agree with anything,” Riesel said, chortling, “I guess I still agree with Situationism. My political analysis is still very much inspired by the ideas associated with May 1968.” When the events of May 1968 came to a close, Riesel reports he fell into a depression, and “hid out” in Paris until the age of twenty-two. In 1972, he and his common-law wife, Françoise, moved to the country with Françoise’s young son from a previous marriage. They decided to become farmers. “I had to leave,” Riesel said. “You had the feeling that life had disappeared completely from Paris. Les Halles was being turned into a shopping mall” (personal communication, October 10, 1998). When Riesel and Françoise left Paris to become néo-ruraux, Riesel asserted that they never identified with the more romantic back-to-the-land movements that emerged in France in the early 1970s. For Riesel, such movements were influenced by the hippie ideologies of U.S. Americans. He found such trends politically unappealing in their naiveté and lack of analysis of “the system.” His decision to move to the country was not particularly political or idealist; it represented a personal attempt to remove himself from a “deadening Paris in the wake of 1968” (personal communication, October 18, 1998). Riesel ex-
pressed cynicism for French ecologists that did “the hippie back-to-the-land thing, trying to bring life back into the rural.” For Riesel, such movements are “ridiculous, because at this point in history, the rural can never really be more than an annex to the global market.”

Riesel and Françoise moved with their son to the southeast near Papillon. Riesel described the area as economically depressed and arid. It was a region where sheep farming was practically the only agricultural option. They also decided to raise sheep to protect the land from the kind of disuse that resulted in disastrous forest fires. After ten years, Rene and Françoise tired of living among what Riesel describes as “parochial and inhospitable villagers suspicious of young out-of-towners who wanted to farm. . . . These villagers preferred to sell unused land to wealthy Germans to build their summer houses.” In 1983 Riesel and Françoise moved to Lozere, a nearly deserted area in southwestern France, tended mostly by sheep farmers: “This time we showed up with our sheep and things went over much better. Now we looked like farmers. You should see it there, though. It’s like Siberia, a very difficult place to farm and live, but the community is much more welcoming; far less xenophobic” (personal communication, October 18, 1998).

Riesel joined the regional body of the Confédération Paysanne in the early 1990s. In our discussions, he emphasized that he did not decide to join the union out of political idealism: “I joined the union because I wanted some form of political affiliation after years of isolation in the rural world.” From the beginning, Riesel had concerns regarding reformist aspects of the Confédération Paysanne’s political agenda. When he finally joined the union, he said, it was because he ultimately supported its “overall agricultural policy.” In 1994 Riesel was elected a national secretary. He describes his first two years as a national secretary as generally positive and stimulating. During this time he fully committed to playing a defining role in the Confédération Paysanne’s anti-gmo campaign, working side by side with Bové, a fellow activist and sheep farmer.

The second part of Riesel’s term, however, proved problematic. During his last year as a national secretary, tensions mounted when Riesel could not fulfill his responsibilities. When union leaders learned that his absence was due to family illness, they expressed sympathy, finally understanding why Riesel was unable to consistently make the weekly journey to Paris. Yet criticisms of Riesel mounted once again following an anti-gmo action he planned with Bové in the town of Nérac. The criticism was not necessarily
about the action itself, but about the fact that Bové and Riesel had conducted the action without first consulting the union. Riesel, in turn, often expressed critical feelings of the Confédération Paysanne. According to Riesel, the Confédération Paysanne’s major limitation was that it “fell prey to popular discourses surrounding democracy.” For Riesel, underlying the Confédération Paysanne’s reformist approach is a belief in social democracy and the power of transparency to democratize knowledge about gmos:

At the Conf., we diverge on the issue of democracy. They believe that if things [about gmos] are decided transparently, then they can distinguish between good and bad gmos. There are some who think that genetically modified rice is good in certain situations in the Third World, etc. But really, [gmos] are a question of man’s place, how the whole of life is becoming marginal and artificial, how we are slowly becoming a society in which the circulation of commodities becomes the sole important thing, and how men become but a support for this system. Little improvements, little reforms, just reinforce the situation. (Personal communication, October 18, 1998)

Riesel has a critique of what he calls citoyenité (citizenism), which he regards as endemic to the culture of the politically correct. According to Riesel, popular discourses on citizen participation, notions of organizing from the bottom up, and the new flurry of political organizing on behalf of formal associations is constitutive of a welfare state in which “citizens act to make life more tolerable within an otherwise intolerable system.” The Confédération Paysanne fits within this kind of “accommodating milieu” (personal communication, October 18, 1998).

In many of our discussions, Riesel reported feeling ideologically isolated within the union. His deeper political ties were to a group of intellectuals in Paris whose analysis and sensibility trace back to May 1968. The group chose to go by no name and rejected a stable form of membership and organizational structure, consistent with its ties to Situationism. The group functioned as a loose cluster of individuals who shared similar political concerns. They met often to plan various forms of direct action and to participate in writing and publishing leaflets, pamphlets, and a monograph series, including a series on gmos written by Riesel. Riesel introduced me to members of this group, and I met regularly with them during my time in Paris. I found the dozen or so members of this group to be intellectually stimulating, good humored, and passionate, ranging in age from seventeen to seventy.
For hours, we would lounge around the Parisian apartment of some former Situationists, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and cheerfully arguing over various political issues. At some point in the meeting (often a day-long affair on a Sunday), we would find ourselves in someone’s kitchen, preparing a fancy, oddly shaped pizza, or cooking up a chicken or two for dinner. It was this activist group that convinced Riesel to become active on the issue of GMOs in 1998. Group members recalled spray-painting a series of anti-GMO messages on symbolic and powerful institutions in Paris. They seemed to take pleasure in the fact that no one seemed to have any idea who was responsible for the enigmatic anti-GMO graffiti (which was written at a time when most people in Paris had no idea what a GMO was). Some also surmise that this group organized La Bataille de la Villette.

José Bové: From the Larzac to Nérac

Like Riesel, Bové was a key actor at the Confédération Paysanne in launching the union’s direct-action campaign. Anytime I mentioned my interest in GMOs, union members would ask, “Have you spoken with Bové?” I first met Bové at the Confédération Paysanne headquarters. The former national secretary now often traveled to Paris from his farm in southern France to assist Le Fur in shaping the report for the Conseil Économique et Sociale. At first Bové seemed wary of meeting me, the woman whom he called “the American student.” He laughed wryly at the idea of a U.S. American anthropologist studying farmers from the Confédération Paysanne. He was even more put off when I informed him that I had a research fellowship at the Centre de Sociologie de l’Innovation (Center for the Sociology of Innovation). Being a doctoral fellow at the Centre meant that I was stationed at one of Paris’s most elite engineering schools, which had close ties to the French government. “So you’re a little spy,” he smiled dryly. He warmed up slightly when I told him a bit about my own activist history in the U.S. ecology movement. He became even more welcoming during a lunch break one day when I told him that I too had participated in anti-McDonald’s actions. At lunch I had overheard him describe some of the anti-McDonald’s actions he had been organizing. Sitting beside him, I responded with genuine enthusiasm. I described similar movements in Vermont, where activists worked long and hard to keep the chain out of their towns. One day, following a meeting, Bové presented me with a gift, a short book that he found interesting written by Paul Aries. A Little Anti-McDo Manual: For the Young and Old (1999) analyzes McDon-
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ald’s from what I’d call a perspective that anticipates the anti-McDonald’s sentiment that would grow around the emerging alter-globalization movement a few years later.

I was continually impressed by Bové’s political sense of humor. For several years he had been constructing farms of the future inside various McDonald’s restaurants with other paysans in his area in southwest France. Within minutes, about twenty paysans would quickly scurry into the restaurant, spreading topsoil and a few farm animals onto the floors to the surprise of workers and locals eating burgers. After setting up the “farm,” he and the other union paysans would put down blankets and picnic baskets, readying to enjoy their lunch on the floor. For about thirty minutes they would recline, passing back and forth bottles of wine, wheels of cheese, and blocks of pâté. Such a lengthy action would be unthinkable in the U.S., where police would arrive at the scene ready to arrest activists immediately. But in France, there is a public culture of respect surrounding union members generally. Police know that it makes for bad press to show state authorities such as the police displaying aggression toward union leaders and members.

Bové is a short man with a muscular build. He has red cheeks and a Fu Manchu mustache that he often combed with his fingers as he spoke. Like Riesel, Bové is a smoker. At any given moment he was attending to some aspect of pipe smoking. After removing the tobacco from a worn leather pouch, he fit the tobacco into the pipe with a small metal instrument, stirring, lighting, puffing, and relighting. Bové’s pipe smoking effectively punctuated and slowed down his otherwise pistol-speed delivery of bold articulations. It also seemed to disarm others who encountered him, as he always seemed somewhat distracted by his ongoing attention to the pipe. Dispersed throughout his confident assertions, Bové would flash a warm smile, exhaling a plume of sweet-smelling smoke, speaking slowly and forcefully, with authority.

Like Riesel, Bové is a néo. He laughed when telling me the profession of his parents: molecular biologists who work at the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (French National Institute for Agricultural Research). After he first learned about the GMO issue, Bové was surprised when he found out the technology was based on the field of molecular biology — though his parents worked in issues of human, not plant, genetics. Bové was born into a middle-class Catholic family in Bordeaux. When he was four to seven, Bové lived with his family in Berkeley, California. His parents were
engaged in scientific research at the University of California, and he remembers having a pleasant time attending an American elementary school. After returning to Paris, he completed elementary school and Jesuit high school. At seventeen, Bové decided not to attend university as planned and instead moved back to his family’s home in Bordeaux. Like many in his generation, he had been enchanted by the events of 1968. He was subsequently dismayed with mainstream French capitalist society and looked elsewhere for inspiration and direction.

At seventeen Bové was inspired to join the antiwar movement as a conscientious objector. To avoid the draft, he hid in a southern farming village. It was there that Bové discovered a Catholic pacifist movement called L’Arche (The Arch). L’Arche was a rural religious community based on Gandhian principles of active nonviolence. Of the ten L’Arche communities scattered through France, one was engaged in the antinuclear and antiwar movements. The L’Arche community that Bové joined was located fifty kilometers from the region known as the Larzac. According to Bové, L’Arche was the first organization to make contact with Larzac farmers. Upon learning of the struggle of Larzac farmers, L’Arche sought to support the farmers’ fight against the government’s attempt to confiscate their lands to expand a military base. According to Bové, the fact that L’Arche was a religious organization gave cultural legitimacy to the traditional Larzac farmers. L’Arche provided a cultural bridge between the antiwar movement and the Larzac farmers’ movement. It was L’Arche that encouraged local priests and bishops to join the struggle of the Larzac farmers. According to Bové, once religious authorities decided to publicly support the farmers’ struggle, L’Arche was able to legitimize the antinuclear dimension of the movement. L’Arche opened the door for nonfarmers such as political activists to become part of the struggle. Bové recalls:

As soon as religious authorities recognized the resistance, Larzac paysans started accepting people from the outside. But in general, Larzac paysans made the decisions. Everyone else listened and gave their support. The antiwar activists, antinuclear activists, anarchists, extreme Leftists, [and] ecologists were there to help, not to lead. Suddenly it seemed, over one hundred towns expressed their support. For the first time, people came together around a common theme, transcending their differences. There was a radical element that hadn’t been introduced before into the paysan milieu. The
movement really helped solidify the paysan struggle that led to the formation of the Confédération Paysanne. In 1973, Bernard Lambert came to Larzac, and Paysans-Travailleurs became a national movement. (Personal communication, November 2, 1999)

In 1976, along with his then wife, Alice, and their newborn daughter, Bové joined the paysans in the struggle surrounding the Larzac. For more than a year, activists had begun occupying abandoned farms bought by outside speculators. Bové and Alice took up residence in an empty farm and began raising sheep. In this endeavor, Bové drew from the farming expertise he had acquired two years earlier when hiding in a rural village as a conscientious objector.

For five years Bové and his family illegally squatted on the Larzac farmland along with many other paysan families. But then in 1981, François Mitterrand and his Socialist Party came to power in France. Responding to popular pressure, Mitterrand granted the squatters permanent ownership of the land. But the former squatters wanted to do more than simply divide the land among themselves into private parcels. Instead they decided to share the land collectively. According to Bové, the Larzac squatters sought to demonstrate the possibility of a solidaire logic of agriculture. They wanted to show the potential of collective ownership of land and a solidarity-based way of life: “When granted the land, we decided to manage it collectively, showing the Socialist government that there was another way to manage land. We had fought for the paysan right to work the land, not to own it. We formed a contract with the state in which seventy-five farms would collectively own the land, about one hundred people in all. And over the years, most of us are still involved in sheep farming” (Bové, personal communication, November 2, 1999).

After winning the right to farm the Larzac land, Bové entered yet another set of struggles. Beginning in 1986, Bové began a nearly decade-long campaign against the Roquefort industry, which had established a production minimum for producers of ewe’s milk. A major triumph came later, in 1994. That year, Bové led the Confédération Paysanne’s fight for the right to representation in industry bodies that determined such norms as price setting for ewe’s milk. This campaign was particularly significant for the union because this right had been historically enjoyed exclusively by farmers in the FNSEA. During the 1980s and 1990s, Bové was also a key union representative in the
Syndicat des Producteurs de Lait de Brebis (Sheep’s Milk Producers’ Union), a body that negotiated regularly with the Roquefort industry for a fair price and production minimum. Bové played a central role in the union, working not only on a regional or departmental level but also on a national level. Bové served as a Confédération Paysanne national secretary while also becoming leader of the union’s national committee on sheep milk production. In addition he played a key advisory role in Le Fur’s council report on gmos in 1997.

Like many others in the union, Bové shifted his focus slightly when he became more aware of gmos in the mid-1990s. Bové learned of the gmo question through the Confédération Paysanne and international networks. Bové was an active member of both the Coordination Paysanne Européenne (European Peasants Coordination) and La Via Campesina, and through these groups, he learned of the potential impacts of gmos on small farmers worldwide. In 1997, Bové began to participate in some initial anti-gmo actions in his local region, focusing mainly on crop pulls of genetically modified fields that went barely noticed by the media. In France, there is a law that requires transparency regarding the location of field trials of gmos. Each town cultivating genetically modified crops as experimental field trials is legally obligated to publicize the precise location at the town prefecture. Walking through fields to uproot genetically modified crops (engaging in a crop pull) thus became a logical and practical form of nonviolent direct action by members of the Confédération Paysanne during 1997 (and it continues to this day).

Crop pulls serve as symbolic actions that aim to draw media and public attention to the existence of gmos in local and national contexts. In preparation for the crop pull, Confédération Paysanne farmers inform the police in advance, alerting them of the exact time and place of the crop pull, and summon the media. They trudge through fields carrying large garbage bags, filling as many as possible. Crop pulls usually culminate when the participants load the garbage bags onto tractors and haul them to the center of a village. In a spirit of celebration, activists then drop the bags before the building of the town prefecture. I was always amazed by the relaxed sensibility that flowed through the event, beginning to end. In the United States, in contrast, such actions would prove nearly impossible and quite dangerous. Field trials of genetically modified crops are considered private information and their whereabouts are classified. Most U.S. Americans do not engage in crop
pulls because they constitute a felony in many states. Activists could also risk their own personal safety if caught by armed police in the fields. There was only one crop pull in U.S. history that was executed successfully. And even this one is little known outside the small U.S. anti-GMO movement. It took place early in the U.S. movement, in 1987. One night, just outside San Francisco, an anonymous group of ecological activists pulled out a field of genetically modified strawberry plants. Scientists at the University of California had inserted into the plant’s genome a gene for frost resistance that they removed from the DNA of a cold-water fish. The hope was to design a strain of strawberries that could grow in very cold climates. Frost-resistant strawberries were never successful or commercialized. Yet the image of this genetically modified entity lives on as a mythical icon of GMO history. It remains a mainstay in the repertoire of anti-GMO activists globally. At nearly any demonstration against GMOs there are activists dressed up as creatures that are half strawberry and half fish.

The French crop pull remains a source of fascination to me. I am amazed that union members actually call the police and media before crop pulls. I find it even more incredible that activists go about their business in the middle of the day, while police stand by, doing nothing to deter their activity. When I would ask Bové about the candidness of the event, he simply replied, “Why bother doing a crop pull if no one sees it?”

The Trial of the GMOs

By the late 1990s, Bové and Riesel had spent considerable time together in the union and various sheep farmers’ organizations. They also shared a similar analysis of agriculture, capitalism, and GMOs. By the end of 1997, the two decided to plan an anti-GMO action come January in southern France that would target Novartis’s genetically modified corn, the GMO that stood front and center of French political controversy. On January 8, 1998, Bové, Riesel, and about one hundred union paysans entered a Novartis storage plant in Nérac (in the Lot-et-Garonne region). After splitting several sacks open with knives, the paysans let loose three tons of corn across the floor. The paysans then sprayed piles of golden kernels with water hoses found in the facility. Bové and Riesel were subsequently arrested, along with the Confédération Paysanne activist François Roux.

News of the arrests and the incident was met with mixed sentiments at
Confédération Paysanne headquarters in Bagnolet. I remember, months afterward, discussing with Confédération Paysanne leaders and salariers Bové and Riesel’s decision to execute the action. Guy Le Fur admitted that when he first heard of the action, he was a bit concerned: “Things like this have to be done carefully, they take careful planning. Or else we end up looking like rioters [casseurs]” (personal interview, May 11, 1998). For the union speaker, François Dufour, his initial apprehension stemmed from the fact that neither Bové nor Riesel had contacted Confédération Paysanne leaders for consultation before taking action: “They simply decided to do it and that was that” (François Dufour, personal communication, May 11, 1999). For one salarier, a key organizer of the Confédération Paysanne’s anti-GMO campaign, news of the action spelled chaos: “After learning of the event, it took weeks to prepare an entire press kit and to figure out how to deal with all of the inquiries, all of the press. It would have been good to have had some notice.” Despite the reservations of various actors, I never sensed outright condemnation or rancor among anyone at the union. Most seemed generally bemused by the work of Bové and Riesel and never questioned whether the union would support them. “They are our men and we will support them” was a common refrain I heard from leaders such as Le Fur and Dufour. Although the Confédération Paysanne contains divergent viewpoints on strategy, it remains unified when supporting its members.

Chapter Six

The Risk Side of the Trial: A Debate About Science

Soon after their arrest, Bové and Riesel set about considering a discursive strategy for the upcoming trial. They designed an action redolent of the ironic and symbolic sensibilities of their forebears in the new paysan movements and the absurdist activists of May 1968. In a spirit of the ridiculous, the two activists named their own hearing the Trial of the GMOs. They would not allow the court to contest the legitimacy of their own actions. Instead they turned the event on its head. Bové and Riesel were to challenge the legitimacy of agricultural biotechnology itself. By the trial’s end, the three who were arrested received a suspended sentence of several months of imprisonment. For Bové and Riesel, however, their “loss” in court and the resulting suspended sentences were of little consequence. Triumph lay in the abundant media following their arrests. For weeks, news stories spun out in the press publicly presenting the duo’s provocative set of GMO discourses. The trial itself was suspended in a tension between two logics, one solidaire and one
instrumental. Bové and Riesel consistently drew upon a solidaire logic that openly criticized corporate greed and that demanded dignity and autonomy for paysans across the globe. But they also relied heavily on the instrumental expertise delivered by scientists who were summoned to support their cause.

The Trial of the gmos is an excellent case for applying ant, particularly the question of how nonhuman actors, actants, always play a central role in debates about science. ant is a framework generated over time by a series of theorists interested in studying the process of technoscience innovation and contestation (see Latour 1986, 1987, 1988a, 1988b, 1991; Callon 1986a, 1986b, 1987, 1997). ant transcends the realist-constructivist binary, which suggests, for instance, that risks related to gmos are either real or socially constructed (not real). Within the rubric of ant, the Bt corn that was debated in the trial is indeed a real object in the material sense. But it is also real as a cultural object. While Bt corn is material, composed of biological germ plasma, it is also the result of cultural-scientific enterprise. Like all human inventions, Bt corn has both material and cultural dimensions that are equally physically real and socially constructed. As a hybrid material and cultural object, Bt corn is also an actant. While lacking the conscious agency of a human, the Bt corn nonetheless demonstrates a nascent ability to act in particular ways. As an actant in this story, Bt corn shaped the French debate about gmos by presenting previously unimagined effects and consequences within the greater network of actors engaged with gmos. Bt corn has the ability to confound experts with its undeterminable effects. It is precisely the corn’s ability to generate confusion that drove the Trial of the gmos. The Bt corn’s indeterminate implications on health and environment moved sets of actors to mobilize around the corn. If Bt corn induced absolute scientific certainty about its unanticipated effects, there would be no Trial of the gmos. There would be no national controversy at this time. By failing to present certainty, Bt corn acted on the humans in the gmo network, inciting them to speak for or against it with great rigor.

At the trial, the actor-network notion of symmetry was at play. Symmetry is the idea that human and nonhuman actors together coproduce networks such as social movements. On the one hand, we see human actors such as scientists, farmers, and legal and media agents. On the other hand, there is the Bt corn. While the human actors argue for or against the corn, the corn acts upon various actors’ sense of certainty, uncertainty, moral understandings, and so on. Although a sack of Bt corn never took the stand at the trial,
its name was invoked endlessly as it played upon actors’ sense of what is real and unreal, risky and nonrisky, and right and wrong.

To defend the farmers (and to defame the Bt corn), Bové and Riesel generated a network of recognized Parisian scientists. Bové and Riesel convinced a set of prestigious scientists to take the day-long journey to the southern town. In particular, they invited the molecular biologist Gilles-Eric Seralini of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (French National Center for Scientific Research). In addition, they invited the biologist Jacques Testard from the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (French National Institute for Agronomic Research), and Richard Lacey (British microbiologist and specialist in BSE or mad cow disease). In numerous press releases following the trial, Lacey was quoted as discussing the risks associated with the Bt corn, calling for the judge to consider a “logic of precaution” (Marris et al. 2004, 7).

Along with Bové and Riesel, the Bt corn coproduced a major press event, again drawing the media in with notions of uncertainty. Together the activists and the corn invoked media agents to cover a trial in which various actors discussed the degree of Bt-related risk. Arguments of risk and precaution saturated the general discourse. On January 10, 1998, Le Monde, France’s most popular newspaper, published an article describing the action as an attempt to “alert the public about the dangers that could affect the health of humanity by transmitting resistance to certain antibiotics” (Da Silva 1998; my translation). La Dépêche, a popular news magazine, also ran a series of articles during the week of the trial. In one story, the magazine featured a cartoon in which a journalist interviews a scientist whose face is half corn-cob, half human. The caption reads, “You’re sure transgenics pose no risk?” (Levalier 1998; my translation).

During the trial, scientists and farmer activists alike invoked previous science crises to bolster their claims about the risks associated with GMOS. In particular, a contaminated-blood scandal from the early 1990s surfaced as a central theme running through the testimony of Riesel, Bové, and the invited scientists (see Hermitte 1995). This contaminated-blood scandal began in 1991. The scientific controversy was set in motion when the journalist Anne-Marie Casteret published an article in a popular news magazine showing that France’s national center for blood transfusion knowingly administered potentially contaminated blood to patients between 1984 and 1985. In this tragic affair, French scientists allowed blood they knew to be potentially
contaminated with HIV to enter the pool of donor blood used in public hospitals for transfusions. When tried in a court of law, it was found that the scientists failed to use available U.S.-patented tests capable of determining the blood’s safety. The accused scientists admitted that they were waiting to use soon-to-be-released French tests. Unfortunately the French tests were patented too late for some blood recipients. After several French citizens tested positive for HIV, the country was in an uproar as citizens considered the moral and rational authority of French scientists. The deeper meaning of the contaminated-blood issue linked, in the mind of the public, issues of power, self-interest, and science. For our purposes here, it also illustrates the role of a nonhuman actant (such as blood) to animate a scientific debate born out of uncertainty. In this historic case, the public saw scientists who made decisions so their hospitals would receive monies for using a French, rather than a U.S., technology (Hermitte 1995, 3). In the mind of the public, scientists had acted like businesspeople, putting profit before human health. Like the Bt corn, the contaminated blood was more than a mere symbol or passive socially constructed thing. The blood, along with the scientists, coproduced a good deal of illness, death, confusion, and public mistrust in science bodies.

At a key moment during the trial, the defense lawyer Marie-Christine Etelin turned to the tribunal. In a solemn voice, she asked the judges, “What would you have done in 1984 or 1985 in responding to doctors who had destroyed bags of contaminated blood?” (Etelin 1998). Etelin compared the destroyers of the Bt corn to the few scientists who did indeed save lives by destroying bags of blood that were potentially contaminated. The contaminated blood, as an active nonhuman actor, played upon the consciences of those in the courtroom.

A news article in Libération (France’s second major newspaper) on January 11, 1998, featured a photograph of the Confédération Paysanne’s banner in Nérac that read, “1985: Contaminé, 1998: Transgené” (1985: Contaminated, 1998: Transgenized). Again, by comparing nonhuman actors such as Bt corn with contaminated blood, the paysans framed GMOs as not only a problem of science and risk but also a problem of a science corrupted by negligence linked to self-interest and power. Without the element of unanticipated effects — generated first by blood, and then by corn — the network comprising the trial would have had little impact.

It is also important to look at the theme of modernity that continually surfaced during the trial. In keeping with the union’s ongoing concern about
its modern status, the question of the Confédération Paysanne’s progressive sensibility was in full bloom. In February 1998, La Dépeche published an article by Claude Julien, the former chief editor of the journal Le Monde Diplomatique and a popular French Leftist intellectual. During the trial, Julien wrote the article “C’est nous qui sommes les modernes” (It is we who are modern). In the piece, Julien declares, “It is we who are modern, because we seek, in this democratic society, a real public debate on genetically modified products” (February 1998) (my translation; emphasis added). The term modernity reverberated a good deal throughout the media coverage of the trial. In Julien’s statement, for instance, he uses the ecumenical we to show solidarity with the paysans who took action against gmos. In so doing, Julien challenges the idea of the backward paysan, asserting instead the modern and rational position of those who destroyed the corn. Julien thus emphasizes the Confédération Paysanne’s ability to bring a rational analysis to its consideration of matters of society, democracy, and science.

During a Confédération Paysanne meeting about a month after the trial, I presented an anxiously awaited copy of a New York Times article that covered the trial (an item that Le Fur and Bové had requested I bring to union headquarters and translate) (New York Times, February 9, 1998). After a friend sent the article to me in the mail, I rushed it over to the union office. In my excitement to see the union featured in the New York Times, I did not even wait to read the article in advance. I sat reading from the paper among the paysans in the meeting room, translating as I went. All around me, paysans hung on every word, apparently pleased to see the union’s name printed, for the first time, in a major U.S. newspaper. After reading the usual narrative about how the group entered the Novartis plant, scattering containers of seed, I paused. I was stunned to hear myself read, “And then, the group of farmers proceeded to urinate on the corn.” As my voice trailed off, a thick curtain of silence fell over the room. A while later, paysans at the table began a round of head shaking and a chorus of “N’importe quoi!” (They’ll do anything at all!). Finally, the Confédération Paysanne leader Valentin Beauval exclaimed, “Great! We finally get mentioned in the New York Times, but it’s for pissing on corn! That’s how they think of us, not as people who know the science, the risks, but as ploucs!” Beauval’s comment crystallized the union’s sentiment completely. According to the paysans in the room that day, not just France but the entire world saw the Confédération Paysanne as a bunch of ploucs. Once again, the Confédération Paysanne was portrayed as a group
of antireal paysans who fear rational science, throw eggs at science experts, and piss on genetically modified corn. This is why the union relied on discourses of scientific risk during this phase of its anti-GMO campaign. Risk allowed the union to assert its status as a modern and rational player in an international science debate.

**THE ANTIGLOBALIZATION SIDE OF THE TRIAL:**

**A DEBATE ABOUT PROFIT-SEEKING SCIENCE**

While relying on discourses of risk and science, Bové and Riesel also publicly introduced a new set of discourses about GMOs that went beyond instrumental notions of risk. They presented to the national and international press their own solidaire expertise as paysans and union workers uniquely situated to speak about GMOs. So in addition to summoning knowledges related to genetic science, they asserted their own authority in matters of global capitalism, cultural homogenization, and the global implications of industrialized agriculture on rural and indigenous peoples. In so doing, the two paysans established themselves and the Confédération Paysanne as a dynamic and politicized site in the broader national and international anti-GMO network. By introducing the union’s solidaire rationality of nature and agriculture, the two paysans distinguished their position from naturalistic discourses of ecology groups such as Écoropa. Écoropa in particular, in its anti-GMO pamphlets and media communications, had tended to present a romantic and essentialist discourse about GMOs transgressing natural orders, allowing man to play god, or impinging on the pure world of nature. To the Confédération Paysanne, nature is not wild or presocial. The union promotes a socialized nature whose value is historical, cultural, aesthetic, and economic. For Bové and Riesel, nature-as-agriculture provides paysans with a viable and productive way of life. Linking questions of nature to issues of labor and capital resonated with many in the budding alter-globalization movement in France and internationally.

What is also distinctive about Bové and Riesel’s discourse during the trial is that they invoked the French worker in relation to GMOs. They framed this worker as a small-scale farmer struggling to survive in a competitive international agricultural economy. In so doing, they called for citizens to support the struggle of a French union—something French citizens are accustomed to doing. Even today, while many in France express frustrations with the day-to-day inconveniences associated with union strikes, barricades,
and demonstrations, the public regards trade unions as integral to French society. Trade unions are generally regarded as a legitimate voice in public debates about labor as an active and constitutive force in social and political life. French unions tend to enjoy degrees of asylum from harsh treatment by French courts or police. It is rare that union members face police brutality when engaging in union activity that entails breaking a law. Union members are also generally exempted from severe jail sentences and fines. By framing paysans at the trial as workers treated unfairly by agro-chemical corporations, Bové and Riesel challenged the exploitation of French citizens by a capitalist system driving science. At the trial, Bové and Riesel point out that citizens’ tax dollars are spent to support public institutions seeking economic profit rather than promoting societal benefits.

It is useful here to return briefly to the contaminated-blood scandal. In this case, we see a science question move beyond the risk discourses associated with contaminated blood. Similarly, in the trial, we see a science issue move beyond risk discourse. Through the discursive framing by Bové and Riesel, we see a science question transform into a discussion of the ways in which powerful institutions such as corporations or governments use science to maximize their own status and profit. By challenging the validity of industrial agriculture and of profit-seeking science research, Bové and Riesel demystified genetic science research. They transformed GMOs into a mode of production worthy of public scrutiny. In so doing, they indirectly disrupted hegemonic notions about science as a wholly objective pursuit, standing outside the domains of society and self-interest.

**Becoming Key Players in the Emerging Alter-Globalization Movement**

For months after the event, news of the trial circulated through Internet-based alter-globalization listservs and websites, as well as through print-based magazines and journals. In celebrating the trial, international activist media hailed the “French farmers” who were heading up a new anti-GMO movement in Europe. Despite the fact that the world press remained ignorant of the differences between large- and small-scale “French farmers,” Confédération Paysanne members took satisfaction in the first major action in their campaign.

During the trial, the union carved out a unique position on global politics economics that resonated with the alter-globalization movement percolat-
ing within France and abroad. In France, the alter-globalization movement during the late 1990s focused on issues of gmos as well as popular intellectual critiques of neoliberal economics. The union summoned the testimony of members of ecology and consumer groups to strengthen its support base. In so doing, they enhanced the credibility of groups such as Greenpeace France and Écoropa. Groups that stand outside the existing system of political parties or trade unions often have difficulty being recognized as potent political actors. As such, they are historically unable to win broad-based support. At the trial, the Confédération Paysanne gave credibility to French ecology groups while also strengthening the union’s ties to international anti-gmo movements associated with Écoropa and the British journal *Ecologist*. The union received a big boost when Écoropa invited one of the most prolific activist writers on the issue of gmos, Vandana Shiva, to the trial. Shiva flew to France to testify against gmos, presenting her own solidaire perspective. At the trial, Shiva spoke out against the “commodification of life” by biological patents and against the disenfranchisement of peasants by multinational corporations seeking to patent and monopolize global food production (Shiva, personal communication, July 7, 1998).

In the news stories following the trial, journalists often mentioned Shiva’s involvement. The idea of a scientist traveling from India to France to testify on behalf of paysans was intriguing. Several articles in popular magazines such as *La Depeche* described Shiva as having come to France to “speak on behalf of the Third World” (a claim that Shiva herself would never make) (Agence France Press, January 21, 1998). While such statements were inaccurate and politically problematic, they did underscore the international character of the Confédération Paysanne’s struggle and demonstrate the global nature of its support base.

As the year following the trial wore on, it became clear that the direct action and its media-rich aftermath had helped the Confédération Paysanne further cement its place within France’s budding alter-globalization network. That year some union members began to engage with the prestigious intellectual and political journal *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Dufour began writing for the journal on a range of political issues, reinforcing the new image of the Confédération Paysanne as the union of paysan intellectuals. At the end of 1998, Dufour became vice president of a French-based organization founded by a group of French thinkers associated with *Le Monde Diplomatique*. This organization was called Association pour la Taxation des Trans-
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actions Financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens). To this day the group is exclusively known by its punchy acronym, attac.

Founded in December 1998, attac’s first objective was to demand taxation on all national and global financial transactions. The rationale was two-fold. First, the group sought to establish a development fund for paysans and other groups marginalized from the market system. Second, the group’s founders yearned to stem the tide of stock market speculation that was driving the neoliberal economic system. attac is a remarkable French organization. It has greatly succeeded in attracting considerable numbers of members and garnering media attention. But most interesting is that it is the first French-initiated grassroots social movement to attain the magnitude and status of an international organization. French politics tends to orbit around state-sponsored parties and unions. Associations outside this structure are generally limited, articulating power on the local or regional level, serving as interest groups rather than constituting international political forces. After its initial focus on financial speculation in France, attac expanded its purview to address a range of issues related to neoliberal economics in countries throughout Africa, America, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Today attac members are active in more than forty countries throughout the world, organizing around supranational organizations such as the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. In addition, attac has generated campaigns to end Third World debt and free-trade zones. attac also works to halt the privatization of water and other public services in the Global South by multinational companies. As the organization itself attests, attac promotes a solidaire rationality, aiming to “propose concrete alternatives to neoliberal orthodoxy based on solidarity (www.attac.org/en/what-attac, 6).

Julien, at the Trial of the gmos, presaged and perhaps facilitated the cooperation between the Confédération Paysanne and the Leftist intellectuals who ultimately founded attac. Renowned for his alter-globalization editorials, Julien testified on behalf of the arrested, articulating a clear anti-neoliberal message. Throughout the trial, the Confédération Paysanne thus asserted itself as a key passage point within international networks for organizations seeking a symbolic intermediary that could represent both the Global North and South. Through the work of Bové, Riesel, and others in the Confédération Paysanne, the French paysan emerged in the popular imagi-
nation as a hybrid entity: the French paysan was now symbol of the post-industrial peasant located within, yet disenfranchised from, powerful sites of capitalist accumulation.

Conclusion

In the Confédération Paysanne's riskocentric phase of direct action, the union appealed to instrumental discourses of risk. At the same time it also became the first group in France to publicly present a solidarity-based critique of GMOS, highlighting the linkages among capital, science, and agriculture. While Riesel and Bové were concerned with protecting the union's modern status and allying themselves with key scientists, they also began to articulate a discourse of paysans and workers that established the Confédération Paysanne as a key node in the emerging national and international alter-GMO movement. Despite dilemmas over modernity and strategy, the Confédération Paysanne became the first French organization to have the cultural credibility to generate a public debate on GMOS. The Confédération Paysanne was not, however, the first French organization to launch an anti-GMO campaign. But the union was the first that proved capable of popularizing the debate, increasingly adding a paysan discourse into the mix as time wore on. After 1999, the Confédération Paysanne was able to foster enough cultural clout to promote an anti-GMO and alter-globalization perspective that resonated with the French public.