Food, Farms, and Solidarity
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PART III

*How France Grew Its Own Alter-globalization Movement*
What happens when French scientists and farmers collide in a debate over gmos? What kinds of conflicts emerge when each side proves unable to appreciate the other’s understanding of the meaning of genetically modified crops? In the spring of 1999, Confédération Paysanne members join forces with farmers from southern India to publicly demonstrate that gmos are not just a problem of scientific risk, but a crisis regarding the fate of international rural peasantry. As we shall see, when union members and Indian farmers destroy gm plants under experimentation by French scientists, chaos ensues. For French scientists, it is irrational to destroy studies that could prove gmos risky. But for the farmers in this story, the rationality for sabotaging the experimental gmos came out of a solidaire rationality, rather than one based on instrumental risk.
Chapter Seven

A Caravan from Paris to Montpelier: From a Drowsy March to a Wild Ride

The Caravan Comes to Paris

In April 1999, the Confédération Paysanne offered to host a stop on a five-hundred-person intercontinental caravan tour of Europe and, later, the United States. The caravan’s mission was to protest neoliberal global economic policy that was disenfranchising indigenous and peasant groups around the world. The Karnataka State Farmers’ Association, the largest agricultural union in India, played a major role in organizing the caravan. As groups of the caravan dispersed throughout Europe, a group of one hundred Indian farmers was scheduled to spend five days in different parts of France for demonstrations related to issues of neoliberalism, farm policy, and GMOs. To understand the caravan more broadly, it must be placed within the context of the Peoples’ Global Action, a significant yet informal network of alter-globalization activists from the Global North and South. Peoples’ Global Action sought to draw attention to such problems as free-trade agreements, which it perceived to be harmful to the world’s poor. Peoples’ Global Action is not an organization per se and, consequently, it has no formal members, spokespersons, or leaders. Instead, it is a network that allows various groups throughout the world to communicate and organize conferences, protests, and gatherings related to global inequalities associated with neoliberal trade policies. The idea for Peoples’ Global Action emerged during a meeting held in 1996 by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, which was formed by Mexicans living in the state of Chiapas. The Zapatistas’ initial uprisings in 1994 (and ongoing struggle) focused on a collective demand for a wide range of issues, including cultural autonomy, access to farmland, and freedom from the harmful practices associated with neoliberalism and free-trade agreements. In 1996, Zapatista organizers made a public call for the first gathering (encuentro) of international grassroots movements; they were to come together in the Chiapas jungle to discuss urgent aspects of their struggle against neoliberalism. The Zapatistas were astonished when more than six thousand activists from more than forty countries arrived, determined to create an international network capable of fighting globalization gone awry.

In 1997 a second encuentro took place in Spain. Representatives from grassroots organizations such as the Brazilian Landless Worker’s Movement
and the Karnataka State Farmers’ Union met to discuss peasants’ rights to farmland, as well as the problem of gmos. In 1998, yet another encuentro gathered in Geneva, Switzerland. It was at this meeting that activists decided to formalize their network, calling it the Peoples’ Global Action. Seeking to avoid the socialist-Marxist trend on the Left to build hierarchical, rigid parties, the network is loosely structured. Yet the Peoples’ Global Action is organized around five key themes: anticapitalism (anti–free trade), hierarchy (patriarchy, racism, religious fundamentalism), direct action (rather than lobbying or reforming powerful institutions), civil disobedience (taking illegal action in the name of social justice), and decentralization and autonomy.

The Karnataka farmers initially suggested the caravan, and it was co-organized with Peoples’ Global Action. Significantly, the Confédération Paysanne joined the international alter-globalization movement by hosting the caravan in France. Here we see a shift. Since 1987, the union had primarily promoted the cause of French paysans against European agricultural policy. Then a decade later the union’s anti-gmo campaign led it to join forces with international groups facing deterritorialization and economic marginalization. Together, they began to forge international, mobile, and hybrid political alliances as they struggled against neoliberalism (see Featherstone 2005).

Paris was scheduled as the caravan’s first of three stops in France. The small committee at the Confédération Paysanne charged with preparing events for the three-day Parisian stint was unprepared to house, feed, and organize one hundred Indian farmers. René Riesel had volunteered to be the point person and organizer. Yet due to a family health crisis, he was unable to be present in Paris during the weeks leading up to the caravan’s arrival. In his absence, an inexperienced group of community volunteers (including me) and union salariers tried as best they could to prepare for the caravan’s arrival. Union organizers were overwhelmed with the idea of preparing for the arrival of nearly one hundred farmers. To take care of housing, a few days before the caravan’s arrival, a salarier at the Confédération Paysanne asked a group of young anarchists if they could use the large abandoned building where the youths were squatting just outside Paris. The squatters agreed to share their quarters, but they warned of their humble offerings. This group of about ten young people slept on rolled-up blankets. The cement floors of the old factory buildings were gritty and cracked, and the squatters made do with no electricity, running water, or flush toilets. Seeing no other alternative, union organizers and volunteers spent the days leading up to the Indian
farmers’ arrival by sweeping, scrubbing, and preparing the squat as best as they could.

When buses finally rolled into the anarchist squat, looks of disbelief and astonishment flashed from the faces of the people behind the vehicles’ windows. Occupying a different cultural universe, the anarchist youths, along with union activists, smiled with wild abandon, shouted excitedly, “Les Indiens!” when they saw their awaited guests. While the French greeters at the squat were thrilled to meet a group of “Indiens,” the Karnataka farmers themselves looked slightly mortified at their first glimpse of a bare-bones abandoned warehouse located just outside postindustrial Paris. Descending tentatively from the bus, the caravan farmers appeared horrified to face the group of scantily dressed punk and hippie youths. They looked even more despondent when they noted the crude accommodations. Many farmers expressed disappointment when they learned that they would be sleeping on cement floors using only thin mats as padding. They were stunned to find that their lodging consisted of buildings with pipes and wires sticking out in all directions. To make matters worse, the union had been able to round up only two portable toilets, two working sinks, and no showers. These accommodations were to be shared by one hundred people. Fresh drinking water and food supplies had yet to be hauled in from Paris by teams of volunteers.

I met the president of the Karnataka State Farmers’ Association, Mahantha Devaru Nanjundaswamy (known within the movement as Professor Swamy, or simply Swami), just minutes after he stepped off the bus at the squat. I was asked to bring him a bottle of water by a Spanish member of Peoples’ Global Action who was working closely with Swami during the caravan’s voyage through Europe. I ran off to a union car that contained bottled water and handed one to Swami, apologizing that it had become hot inside the car. He nodded with a quiet, dignified smile, saying, “Water is water.” Swami was a short small-boned man, and his fine-featured face was dominated by a large pair of wire-framed glasses edged in gold. His features were flanked between a boxy green cotton cap that he always wore and a coarse grayish beard. Over his shoulder he slung a long green bolt of cloth with his union’s insignia printed at the bottom. The cloth acted sometimes as a kind of scarf, sometimes as a shawl, but mostly it sprawled over one shoulder and down his back. Swami spoke in a careful quiet manner, commanding immediate attention and respect from the (mostly male) members of his union who generally surrounded him, appearing eager to serve and please
him. As the leader of the Karnataka State Farmers’ Union, Swami assumed a central position of leadership in the five-hundred-person caravan traveling across Europe that spring. I was grateful to conduct several interviews with him, and he discussed the meaning of the caravan and his views on neoliberalism and agriculture. During his stay, I was also asked many times to translate for Swami, facilitating communication between him and non-English-speaking paysans such as Riesel.

About thirty minutes after the caravan’s arrival, tensions began to mount. While I was working to further prepare the squat for its new inhabitants, caravan members took me aside. Misreading me as a European—but not a member of the union—they looked to me despondently, as if I could somehow solve their problems: “We expected to meet traditional French paysans. Or at least well-groomed Parisians.” Assuming I had a position of power or authority, they beckoned for a better alternative to what the squatters had to offer. I summoned union paysans, who did their best to allay the concerns of the caravan farmers. The union paysans explained that things hadn’t quite gone as planned. The first night was awkward as it became obvious that neither the squatters nor the union members had prepared ample or appropriate food for the caravanners. Finally a group of paysans drove into Paris, taking with them a long list of groceries requested by caravan women. At about nine o’clock the paysans returned from Paris with provisions. Within minutes, caravan women set to work, preparing regional delicacies that did not appear until about ten-thirty that night. During this first meal together, paysans and anarchists mingled with caravan members as they sat together on the floor devouring a late-night meal. Despite the disorganization and late hour, the ambiance improved as the group enjoyed their dinners, sitting on the scrubbed cement floor in small circles.

Caravan women and men sat in separate clusters while eating and performing other activities. This gave me the opportunity to speak with women about issues that were often intimate and sometimes disturbing. That first night, I learned that the women occupied a distinctly separate sphere from the men in the group. When not attending meetings or direct actions, women gathered together, often singing, laughing shyly, and exchanging stories about their lives. Men tended to gather in small groups, a good distance from the women, playing cards, smoking, or discussing various political matters. In speaking with the women that night, we used English as a common language. Usually, some woman around me knew enough English to translate
for the others. For hours we kept afloat an often-scattered set of conver-
sations. I observed the many women reclining along the crumbling floors,
wearing glowing silk saris or decorative cotton ones. I came to understand
that the fabric of the women’s saris often (but not always) indicated their par-
ticular class or caste. I did my best to make sense of the contrasting contours
of this group of people differentiated by sharp dynamics of differing cultures,
languages, classes, and professions.

While many of the French organizers referred to everyone in the caravan
as les Indiens, the group was far from homogeneous. About four-fifths of the
participants were members of the Karnataka State Farmers’ Union and came
from southern India. But they were individuals from across a strongly strati-
fied society, which is divided along lines of gender, class, professional status,
and caste. The rest of the participants hailed from many countries through-
out southern Asia, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and
Nepal. Many of these actors came as representatives of farmers’ groups, in-
digenous associations, workers’ councils, women’s cooperatives, and organ-
izations of the unemployed.

TENSIONS MOUNT: GENDER, CLASS, AND POWER

My decision to spend a good deal of time with caravan women during
their three days in Paris was informed by several factors. Their stay in Paris
took place during an unseasonable heat wave. I found it difficult to cover
myself as effectively as the caravan women did. For many men in the cara-
van, my tank tops or fitted T-shirts signaled an invitation for flirtation that
on a few occasions erupted into outright sexual harassment. One evening,
harassment churned into physical assault when a young man from the Karna-
taka union forced me into an empty bus, where he pinned me down on a seat,
declaring that he would “have me.” When a group of older men finally heard
me screaming in the bus, they rushed in to pull me out. After offering me a
vague and hurried apology, the older men chided the young man, threaten-
ing to report the event to Swami — which, to my knowledge, they never did.
Nearly each member of the caravan inquired about my marital and parental
status. Learning that I was unmarried and childless made matters worse. And
my youthful appearance probably did not help to establish me as a thirty-
something woman worthy of respect. But the more I spoke with women, it
became clear that they also remained vigilant in regard to the men on the
Caravans, gmos, and McDo

caravan. They reported the need to travel in pairs when going off to the bathroom or even moving from one building to another.

The caravan was co-organized by the Peoples’ Global Action, which asserts itself as an antipatriarchal movement. When I mentioned this to women on the caravan, one spoke for the group, laughing at me: “Oh, the men act here as they do at home. Just because we fight against [free] trade, doesn’t mean the men will respect women.” Indeed, despite their status as members of a political caravan, many women expressed that the men often treated them as badly as they would treat them in their own country. Many women were married but traveling without their husbands. Their sponsoring organizations could only pay for one woman representative. So I often heard, “Being seen as a woman alone is like being seen as a whore. [The men] can say or do to you whatever they want.” When I asked women what Swami had to say about their treatment on the caravan, they generally laughed, saying, “He is so respected. He’s a leader, a professor. But don’t forget that he’s a man! He doesn’t want to hear a word about it.” As a cultural anthropologist, I did my best to contextualize this masculinist (and at times violent) environment and focused on understanding as much as I could about who and what the caravan was. The female squatters and Confédération Paysanne members, on the other hand, had a different approach. They tended to admonish the offending caravan men, writing them off as jouers (players). Sometimes they would threaten to inform Swami of the men’s transgressions. I was struck by the way many men and women (both within and outside the caravan) perceived Swami as a source of discipline. Many imagined him as a masculine force who could control or punish men for treating women badly.

Another set of tensions began to surface during those three days in Paris. Within hours, paysans from the Confédération Paysanne began to look accusingly at many of the members of the caravan. In particular, they scrutinized several farmers from the Karnataka union, determining them to be “upper class.” Pulling me aside, union paysans exclaimed in horror, “Look at their hands!” Lacking agricultural savoir faire, I looked at the hands of the men and women ambling about, dazed by their new surroundings. I found their hands illegible. I did, however, get the message. One paysan, a national secretary, ran up to me, eager to let off steam: “They came saying they’re paysans, but they’re not. Most are wealthy landowners who’ve never worked
a field in their lives. They have paysans work for them. They just wanted a free trip to Europe!” When questioned directly by one bold Confédération Paysanne youth, a young Karnataka farmer turned to me, asking me to translate. Showing us his hands, he said to me in English, “You’re right, my hands are not the hands of a hard worker because I have been studying abroad this year. But usually I am hard at work on my father’s farm.” Unimpressed, the Confédération Paysanne farmers shook their heads in disgust, muttering an exasperated, “N’importe quoi” (Nonsense).

Riesel finally arrived at the squat a few hours after the caravan rolled in. Riesel was the primary organizer of the caravan’s voyage to Paris, so several union members gathered around him. They wanted to let him know how they’d been tricked by the fake paysans. “We’ve talked to many of these guys,” one young man said, “and not one of them has a small farm. They have huge enterprises. They might as well be [fnsea] farmers.” Riesel squinted at the union men, taking a long drag of his thinly rolled cigarette. Then he exhaled, “You can’t know who all these people are. Have you gone around and taken a poll on each single one? They’re from an enormous union. Of course there are some who aren’t paysans. Their system is different from France. But they’ve haven’t come all the way here for nothing! They’ve come to fight the G8. It’s not your job to play cop [flicque].” At that, Riesel walked away from the group of men and began getting to work to help get the squat ready for night.

Several hours later, after dinner, I sat down next to Riesel. I too wanted to ask him about the matter. He turned to me with impish eyes and a sardonic smile: “Oh, my dear Chaia, we’re all paysans, aren’t we? You’re a paysan, as you study paysans and write a book. I’m a paysan, a Situationist paysan. Too bad! Let them all be paysans. All I know is these Karnataka people organize some fierce demonstrations. They burned an entire building containing gmos in southern India just a month ago. That’s paysan enough for me.”

What I find striking in Riesel’s words is a thread of Situationist absurdism strung into his understanding of identity. Riesel indirectly acknowledges the limits and instability of all identities, including that of paysan. By including me, an anthropologist from the United States studying French paysans, in the identity world of union paysans, he illustrates the often untenable dimensions of identity that surface as actors cling too heavily to them. In a way, Riesel is saying, “If I, a Situationist, can call myself a paysan, then who am I to judge others?” There is also a bit of instrumental logic running through
Riesel’s solidarity rationality. Riesel appeared willing to engage what could be called a strategic essentialism (Spivak 1990). While recognizing the limits of identities, such as paysan, he also saw such forms of identification as effective in bringing disparate groups together to fight a united cause. Riesel’s ironic smile and statement suggested his clear understanding of what matters to him politically. Detached from the romantic view of paysans—or peasants generally—as inherently virtuous, Riesel articulated what he values most in the activists with whom he works: the ability to join forces to fight destructive forms of power and the audacity to take dramatic action to accomplish a group’s goals. Riesel respects activists with daring. Identifying more as a revolutionary than a paysan, Riesel was inspired by farmers who would set fire to a corporate building that housed injustice. Thus, his solidarity aligns more with actors willing to confront power directly than with actors who identify as paysans.

One further note on the term *paysan*: When speaking of any smallholder—from France or internationally—union members tended to refer to the individual as a paysan. While union members know that the term *paysan* has specific cultural meaning in France, they nonetheless extend the term to any smallholder in any culture. For the purposes of this book, I use the term *paysan* only when referring to union members. I also use it when quoting union members as they refer to other smallholders. In all other cases, I refer to farmers outside the Confédération Paysanne as either peasants (if the actors use an equivalent term in their own language), smallholders, or family farmers (when I speak about a specific set of smallholders in the United States).

**MORE TENSIONS OVER A FAILED MARCH**

Union organizers planned a series of actions and press events in Paris that they hoped would draw significant media attention. The paysans planning the caravan’s activity during those days imagined a robust series of happenings, the kind they had seen in international journals featuring the bold Karnataka farmers burning down buildings and bringing thousands of demonstrators into the streets. Paysans had seen images of thousands of Indian farmers marching in Bombay, waving broad green strips of cloth (their union’s color). In photographs the Karnataka farmers looked fierce, dedicated, and militant.

I too was enthralled to see what would unfold during the caravan’s three
days in Paris. I had heard about the Karnataka farmers for years and was excited to speak with Swami about his union’s style of demonstrating. In one interview he described his union’s first major anti-GMO protest in December 1992: “About three hundred Karnataka farmers were at the bottom entrance of the offices of Cargill Seeds [a division of the U.S.-based multinational]. Then about seventy-five of us entered the offices. We promised that our protest would be nonviolent. We dumped several walls of file cabinets; we tossed stacks of papers through the office window. They fell like snow. Then we went back to join the others outside the building. We lit matches and threw them onto the piles of papers in the street. All around us, traffic came to stop.” “We lit a ‘bon fire,’” he laughed dryly. “Bon fire is a good term,” he smiled at me mischievously. “It comes from the French *bon feux*, or good fire. We were there to cremate Cargill. We want to cremate them all, Monsanto too” (Swami, personal communication, June 16, 1999). The next year, 1993, two hundred thousand Karnataka demonstrators marched in New Delhi to demand that the Indian government denounce the Dunkel Draft on the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights section of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Swami in particular had criticized the Dunkel Draft, asserting the right of every farmer to produce, improve on, and sell seeds. For Swami, the production of genetically modified rice—a staple crop on which all Indians depend—would mean the loss of farmers’ resources and property (Gupta 1998, 292).

Despite the Karnataka farmers’ reputation for organizing impressive events, the first two days of the caravan’s Parisian stay proved uneventful. The press conferences and rally that took place in the financial section were poorly organized, and at each one both French organizers and members of the caravan failed to arrive at the right place and time. Haplessly, these events took place with little audience or press. Both French and caravan actors appeared hot, tired, and frustrated with each day’s labors. Most paysans held out hope that at the very least they would be able to pull off a high-profile march to the Eiffel Tower, where caravan members were to publicly demonstrate against neoliberal global economics. With one hundred caravan members and at least twenty French organizers, they would surely generate critical mass to draw attention and excitement.

What followed instead was a disastrously low-profile stroll through Paris. Riesel and others had asked caravan members to show up at a particular Parisian square at noon. But by one o’clock, only about seventeen members
had arrived. At two o’clock, union paysans decided to go ahead with the march. Yet there were only about twenty caravan members joined by ten or so paysans and volunteers who had finally made their way there. Despite the small number, those present were ready to take to the streets. During the quiet promenade through Paris, a few Karnataka farmers tried their best to engender enthusiasm. From time to time during the nearly two-hour march, some took their cue from Swami, enthusiastically swirling their signature green cotton cloths above their heads in a circular fashion. While marchers shouted Karnataka union slogans in their native tongue, passersby on the streets offered back looks of confused annoyance. Most caravan members walked distractedly, talking casually among themselves, pointing to various sites in the city that called their attention. Along the way, a few radio and television reporters stopped a marcher or two, asking to film or interview them. But, overall, union paysans determined the event a media flop.

The march was to culminate in a rally held in a small park behind the Eiffel Tower. Union paysans had prepared a modest sound system and invited various Parisian activists to speak. Yet with so few present, the rally turned into a small impromptu meeting. About ten men from the caravan sat around Swami on the grass, nodding their heads gravely as he spoke. The union had prepared a picnic lunch of bread, cheese, bottles of wine, melon, and lots of water bottles to allay the day’s dragging heat. Those in the caravan who chose not to join the group sitting with Swami lounged yards away. These individuals sat on blankets provided by the union, waving away the heat with their hands. From time to time, a few men and women would scurry off to buy ice cream from local vendors scattered around the tower. At one point, two young paysan men sidled up to me to speak in confidence. “Look at them,” one said, pointing to a group of caravan members snapping photographs of each other before the tower. “How can they take pictures of such a thing? Don’t they know it’s a symbol of imperialism?” The other echoed his friend’s outrage, asking, “What are they, tourists?”

For weeks leading up to the arrival of the caravan, many Confédération Paysanne members had clearly romanticized the caravan as a group of exemplary paysans. Many were patently disappointed to be faced with a group whose internal power dynamics were becoming increasingly clear. As one young paysan said to me that day, “Many of these people are of the upper class in India. They aren’t workers like paysans. They’ve come here on vacation!” During the picnic lunch, there was talk among caravan members and paysans
about why so few from the caravan had made it to the march. One woman in the caravan said to me, “The rich in our group are locating Parisian electronics stores, buying cameras and laptop computers that are cheaper here.” The poorer members of the caravan, many of whom represented women’s peasant associations and workers’ cooperatives, reclined on the lawn, gazing up admiringly at the shining tower. “Of course they’re out shopping,” said a young woman from a small rural village in Sri Lanka (through a translator). “They have so much money. Back home, they wouldn’t so much as look at us, let alone share a bus with us as we’re doing now!” Comments about stratification within the group were abundant. Women who saw me as a sympathetic and neutral individual within the group shared stories about what life was like for them as poor women both at home and on the caravan. A young woman from Bangladesh described being sexually accosted when walking alone at sunset to fetch water for her family: “If you are seen alone, without a man to protect you, you are nothing but a prostitute and you deserve what you get.” Other comments were more about questions of class and caste stratification. An Indian woman from the untouchable class commented about the odd situation presented by the caravan: “In India I would be the servant of many of the people here. I would not even be able to prepare their food, though, as I’m not pure. But on the bus here, I even sit on the same seat with an elite woman. I eat the same food and we sit at the same meetings. We all know it is fake, though. If we were at home, they would not look at me.” The caravan was a temporary disruption of the social orders that members maintained at home. What struck me was that no actors pointed to political contradictions between the broader goals of the caravan and the stratified social systems back home. In these women’s narratives, fighting neoliberalism was not necessarily linked to fighting forms of social stratification such as class or caste.

As the Peoples’ Global Action held gender equality as one of its key values, it was interesting and disturbing to see that gender inequality was never discussed, at least during my time with the caravan. It was difficult to determine why the women failed to make these connections. Was their social structure was so hegemonic, so taken for granted, that they were unable to challenge it consciously? Or did these women simply not want to discuss these contradictions with male members of the caravan? Also noteworthy was the sharp contrast between the members of the Karnataka union and the Confédération Paysanne in terms of cultural and organizational style.
The Confédération Paysanne openly celebrates its nonhierarchical and decentralized structure and lacks an authoritarian leader. In this way, the union shared much in common with a post-Marxist body like the Peoples’ Global Action. In contrast, the Karnataka union is explicitly hierarchical. If the union speaker François Dufour was jovial, down to earth, and approachable, Swami was cool, genteel, and distant. His mere presence seemed to wield a tremendous degree of intellectual and political power.

Several times during their stay in Paris, caravan members would hear news that Swami had called for a formal assembly. Whether the gathering was held at the squat or in a Parisian park, they arranged themselves around Swami in a specific order. While top-ranking male union leaders flanked his sides, other men took their places beside these men, standing in order of marked status. As many members of the Karnataka union explained to me, the smallest and poorest farmers in the union were always positioned farthest from Swami at such meetings. As for caravan women, they knew never to sit in close proximity to Swami. Instead, they served as audience, along with poor or undistinguished men. Their job was to prepare food for caravan men and to listen intently when Swami spoke to the group.

The meeting Swami called for that day behind the Eiffel Tower was to address reports he had heard about tensions among caravan members. He spoke intermittently in English and in a few other South Asian languages. He delivered a lecture slowly, deliberately, in philosophical terms. Expressing disappointment in the group’s behavior, he discussed the need for the group to show solidarity and project a dignified image of the Karnataka State Farmers’ Union to the rest of the world. “Those who are off buying computers,” he said, looking down, “are acting selfishly. But we must remain unified in our mission.” During his oration, he commanded tremendous attention from the small group gathered around him. The men nodded and applauded furiously at each point he made.

The Paris experience provided a window into the complexity and heterogeneity that constitute the cultures of various peasant groups. Unlike progressive groups that emerged in France post-1968, the Karnataka State Farmers’ Union emerged from a radically different cultural and political context. As a postcolonial formation (Gupta 1998), the Karnataka State Farmers’ Union sprang from a country marked by years of colonialism and centuries of hierarchies of class, caste, religion, and gender. The Indian union also emerged from a tradition of Gandhian grassroots movements. While these
movements promote active nonviolence, they are marked by culturally specific practices of hierarchical leadership and organization. As I noted in Paris, while many members of the caravan expressed to me degrees of dissatisfaction with the organization’s hierarchical style, they spoke off the record and never publicly. Despite glaring cultural differences, leaders such as Riesel were committed to working collaboratively with the Karnataka activists. Increasingly, many members of Confédération Paysanne came to understand the necessity of negotiating differences in organizational styles and structure while working to build an international movement.

**BURNING PLANTS, GOING SWIMMING**

After the caravan’s uneventful Parisian stay, Riesel invited about twenty Karnataka farmers to accompany him to the southern city of Montpelier to participate in a small but ultimately significant direct action. For Bové and Riesel, this particular direct action reflected a significant shift in strategy. As Riesel explained, “For us, the trial was about the multinationals, the role of Novartis in pushing genetically modified corn on us. This time, our target was public research in the hands of corporations” (personal communication, October 18, 1999). For months before the direct action in Montpelier, Riesel had joined with Bové and other union members to destroy open-air field trials. They had also taken action against greenhouse studies of genetically modified plants in several sites in Montpelier. But the action conducted by Riesel and the Karnataka farmers elicited the greatest public response.

On June 5, 1999, Riesel invited a group of caravan members from the Karnataka union to join Confédération Paysanne activists in sabotaging experimental genetically modified rice growing in a research greenhouse facility. The research was the property of two French-based science institutions. The first, called **CIRAD**, is the Centre de la Recherche Agronomique pour le Development (Center for Agricultural Research for Development). CIRAD focuses on developing agricultural plants useful for what CIRAD actors call “developing countries.” The second science institution at issue that day was the **INRA** (National Institute for Agricultural Research). The latter tends to concentrate its energies on developing agricultural practices for various areas within France itself. At the time of the caravan, most individuals active within anti-gmo networks were aware that agro-chemical corporations sought to patent and commercialize gmo equivalents of key staple crops internationally. While corn, soy,
and canola were the center of concern for small growers in the Global North (as well as in Brazil and other southern countries), the development of genetically modified strains of rice caught the attention of Indian activists. It is for this reason that Cirad—with its southern focus—was chosen as a key site for demonstrating against GMOS. Cirad scientists, it was rumored, were developing a strain of GM rice. According to Shiva and Swami, allowing private corporations to patent rice varieties could have dire impacts on biodiversity and seed-saving practices among India’s many peasant rice cultivators.

For Riesel, the goal of this particular action in Montpellier was to enter and sabotage a greenhouse laboratory growing genetically modified rice. Cirad’s mission was to create a variety of genetically modified rice that would be helpful to developing countries. Rejecting this view, Riesel and the Karnataka farmers saw taking symbolic action together as a crucial step against Cirad and its funder, Cargill. They would demonstrate an international refusal of genetically modified rice. Riesel stated to me before the action, “We did [the action] with the Indians to show symbolically that this is not just about France[,] . . . to show that this is about globalization and about turning the world into merchandise. Rice is not merchandise. It is nature, food, and it is an important crop in the developing countries” (personal communication, September 19, 1999). Swami and the Karnataka farmers were eager to conduct an anti-GMO protest on French corporate soil. Blending Confédération Paysanne and Karnataka sensibilities, the farmers entered a Center for Development greenhouse, removed trays full of genetically modified rice plants, and tossed them into a pile on the greenhouse lawn. Dancing and singing around the plants, the Indian farmers waved their green union shawls. At some point during the dance, the farmers decided to engage in their signature act, “cremating” GMOS. After dousing the plants with alcohol, they lit the pile of greenery on fire. Around this relatively small group of people stood a few policemen who merely parked themselves around the demonstrators, observing the events. The press, notified of the action beforehand, was on the scene, snapping photographs and interviewing various activists. After the activists stamped out the small fire with their feet, the action was over. The group of Karnataka farmers and Confédération Paysan paysans then proceeded to stroll down to the ocean for a picnic and a bit of swimming. While Karnataka women sat on the sand in their saris, the men lifted their pant legs and waded into the frothy waves. Confédéra-
tion Paysanne farmers (men only) stripped down to their undershorts and dove eagerly into the waves.

The action was followed by much media frenzy. According to Riesel, he did not anticipate the amount or degree of public attention so easily won. Confédération Paysanne members had worked hard to generate media attention around the trial. But this time, with almost no effort, a flood of media soon poured into national papers about the action. As Riesel said, “It’s amusing to see how the media liked to describe us little farmers, peasants from France, working together with little Indian peasants to destroy big and powerful scientific research” (September 29, 1999). Upon learning that their research materials had been destroyed, the enraged scientists went to the press and to legal forums. For weeks following the incident, a heated exchange tore through French newspapers. While many French scientists tended to publicly denounce the action, various environmental and consumer groups defended the Confédération Paysanne.

A TALE OF TWO RATIONALITIES

The rice action, as well as other actions that summer, signaled a collision between the hegemonic risk frame and an emerging alter-globalization frame. While biologists evaluated the rice primarily in terms of environmental and health risks, Confédération Paysanne activists framed it in terms of paysan survival and neoliberal globalization. Once again, an instrumental rationality bumped up against a solidaire worldview. Scientists from the public research bodies conducting the studies regarded risk as an exclusive frame for thinking about the rice. Many of these scientists were unable to think about risk as a frame (one among many), and so were unable to consider nonrisk frames as potentially legitimate. This rice affair is a tale of two rationalities. According to a calculative and instrumental rationality of risk, the Confédération Paysanne’s action was illogical. According to a solidaire rationality, however, the action made complete sense. In a spirit of social justice, the farmers danced around the pile of genetically modified plants, tossing matches into the pile as they clapped their hands and sang. They were celebrating their symbolic attempt to put an end to a form of agriculture that they saw as dangerous to paysans all over the world.

The term *irrational* surfaced as a potent keyword reappearing in academic and popular news articles covering the incident. From the riskocentric perspective of the scientists conducting the study, it was irrational for the
farmers to tamper with their experiment. These scientists could not understand the farmers’ motivations. If farmers were concerned with the environmental and health risks associated with genetically modified rice, why would they deter a study that could potentially support their goal to ban gmos on scientific grounds? When interviewed, scientists from Cirad such as Michele Dufar asked bewilderedly, “Didn’t the Confédération Paysanne ask for studies of the risks associated with these plants?” (personal communication, September 20, 1999). After all, the Confédération Paysanne itself had summoned scientists to the trial in Nérac to speak about such risks just a year before.

A biologist from the National Institute for Agricultural Recherche (French National Institute for Agricultural Research), Marie Chevre, publicly expressed outrage in France’s key Leftist daily (La Libération, June 7, 1999). In the interview she decried the “irrationality” of Confédération Paysanne farmers who destroyed risk-related research. A colleague of Chevre, the biologist Jean-Benoit Morrell, explained to me: “They, the Confédération Paysanne, say they are concerned about this technology, but how can that be true when they destroy research that is investigating potential risks? Clearly, they have another political motivation for doing this” (personal communication, September 10, 1999).

Riesel and the other farmers there that day thought the action was quite rational; it was completely consistent with their overall perspective. While they were earnestly concerned about dangers associated with gmos, the risk factor represented but one problem among a myriad of equally pressing social and political issues related to gmos. For Riesel, in particular, the Montpelier rice action constituted a rational attack on a technology associated not only with potential threats to health and the environment but also with the harms of globalization, corporate-financed research, and a model of postindustrial agriculture that endangers local agricultural economies throughout the world.

Bové and the Anti-McDo Action of 1999

Heated debates in La Libération and in the scientific community over the Montpelier rice action continued through the summer of 1999. The event marked a media success for the union and stimulated even more public discussion about gmos than the trial. Yet while the rice affair received a good amount of national and international attention, the public might have for-
gotten the action by summer’s end. But in August a truly big news story about the union would hit the press. A series of events were sparked off by an anti-McDonald’s action that serendipitously allowed the Confédération Paysanne to enter the national and international spotlight. Having captured the media’s attention, the union was able to establish a clear link in popular consciousness between GMOs and neoliberalism that would indirectly challenge the hegemony of science based on instrumentalist risk.

**From McDo to Millau**

The trial and the Montpellier rice actions represented major coups for the union’s anti-GMO campaign. Yet those two actions would pale in comparison with what was to come. After a now-infamous anti-McDonald’s action, the Confédération Paysanne finally cultivated a frame for GMOs in a way that would deeply resonate culturally with the French and international public. In August 1999, Riesel was working to strengthen ties between the union and the growing international alter-globalization movement. He flew to India to participate in a Peoples’ Global Action meeting hosted by the Karnataka State Farmers’ Union. During the same time, Bové planned a local action a few days before he was to go on a family vacation. The demonstration was another in a series of actions in McDonald’s in his region. Bové had been leading anti-McDonald’s actions for years, conducting farms of the future in many of its restaurants throughout the southwest. For Bové, McDonald’s was a potent symbol of globalization gone awry. According to Bové, “McDo crystallized everything that was wrong with the global food system” (October 12, 1999). It is worth noting here that *McDo* is French slang for McDonald’s. The anti-McDonald’s action in August was intended to send a particular message. At the Confédération Paysanne’s annual national congress in April in Vesoul, union members discussed the question of how to respond to the WTO’s decision to punish Europe for banning hormone-treated beef.

And thus enters yet another nonhuman actor into this story: hormone-treated beef. The question of hormones in French meat has a history that dates back to the 1970s. Since that time, the union has been aware of the negative reception to hormone-treated beef by French consumer organizations. Fearing beef boycotts, which could harm French farmers, the Confédération Paysanne worked with other farmers’ groups to lobby the EU to ban hormone-treated beef among European producers. Many in the union worried that the WTO would regard a European ban as an illegitimate form of
protectionism. Trade officials use the term *protectionism* when they believe a country is refusing to import a certain product based on its desire to shield its own domestic markets from a stream of less-expensive or more-valued imported products—a event that could weaken the importing countries’ markets. The WTO frowns on protectionism, but it will at times permit a country to ban the importation of a product if that product can be considered a health risk. As there is still little scientific proof that hormone-treated beef is harmful to those who eat it, the WTO determined the European ban to be protectionist.

Hormones had already proved themselves to be key actants in food-related social movements. In the 1970s, they had the sway to stop consumers from buying farmers’ products. Hormones would also rile up the WTO and U.S. President Clinton. In many industrial livestock systems, farmers either add growth hormones to animal feed or inject the hormones into animals’ bodies. Such practices have become routine in the United States among industrial farmers encouraging rapid and bulky growth of beef cattle (Schell 1985, 57). These hormones invoked distinctive responses from various sets of actors in France. Some members of science, farm, and consumer bodies publicly stated that hormones are unnecessary and unhealthful both to the animals and to the humans who eat them. They asserted these beliefs despite a body of scientific evidence that could impress the WTO. Other sets of actors, mainly in farmers’ and consumers’ groups, rejected hormone-treated beef due to questions of taste. According to many actors I interviewed, hormone-treated beef has an inferior gonflé (puffed up) or pâle ou liquide (watery taste). Like Bt corn, hormone-treated beef is thus another nonhuman actor that induced a range of responses from actors in this story. While some actors expressed uncertainty and confusion, others articulated disgust and anger. In any case, hormone-treated beef is indeed an actant, spurring human actors to take legal action and to engage in public demonstrations.

In 1997 the WTO lifted the de facto ban on hormone-treated beef to Europe that had been in place for decades. In 1998 the Dispute Settlement Body of the WTO took action. The Dispute Settlement Body is generally called upon when member-states of the WTO have trade disagreements. Pressured by the United States, the Dispute Panel Body announced that it would give Europe fifteen months to lift its ban on U.S. hormone-treated beef. The deadline, May 13, 1999, came and went. European leaders defied the WTO, keeping the ban intact. In retaliation, the WTO sanctioned Europe for rejecting the
hormone-treated beef. The sanction entailed a 300 percent customs surcharge on nearly one hundred European agricultural export products. Many of these products were luxury products such as fine cheese that are central to the local economies of many farmers throughout Europe.

**PUTTING THE BEEF QUESTION IN CONTEXT:**

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WTO**

To more fully understand the French beef affair that led to the anti-McDonald’s action, it is key to clarify the broader historical context surrounding the WTO. The union’s decision to create a direct action against the WTO reflects its general sentiment about neoliberalism, free trade, and industrial agriculture generally. Groups such as the Confédération Paysanne view institutions such as the WTO as part of a problematic Bretton Woods system that world leaders put into place during and after World War II. The WTO is a multinational decision-making body. As such, delegates of member-states determine policies that have implications for peoples and markets worldwide. Supranational institutions such as the WTO, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank are often poorly understood (or patently unknown) by those around the globe whose everyday markets and cultural practices are dramatically touched by them. Yet, as we have seen in this story, there do exist actors, such as those in the Confédération Paysanne, who attempt to understand and engage with such institutions. In recent years, the WTO has become a potent locus for actors to express disenchantment with the Bretton Woods system, associated with the neoliberal system itself.

Although I cannot provide a fully detailed discussion of the WTO in this text, I will try to succinctly outline some of the WTO’s main history and features. I hope to shed light on the place and meaning of the WTO in the minds of alter-globalization activists. The WTO’s history began during World War II. Before the war, trade relations between various nations were generally bilateral; leaders between two trading countries reached their own agreements privately and independently. In other words, when one country sought to develop trade relations with another, the two simply made a confidential trade policy. Sometimes the agreements stabilized economic relations between trading countries. At other times, disputed contracts engendered political conflict. In 1944, during World War II, leaders of the allied nations came together at the Bretton Woods Conference in New Hampshire (in the United States). Leaders discussed the need for a supranational body
that could peacefully govern trade between nations at the war’s end. Ideally, these trade discussions would transcend the economic interests of particular countries. According to Bretton Woods leaders, trade agreements would sometimes be plurilateral—involving the trade interests of a limited set of countries. But Bretton Woods officials hoped for increasingly multilateral agreements—ones that would be accepted by a major set of countries with key markets. Such plurilateral or multilateral agreements, it was believed, would assist national leaders to develop trade policies in a more systematic, transparent, and diplomatic manner.

At its first meeting, many at Bretton Woods promoted the idea of creating an international trade organization to be guided by the United Nations. But the United States (and a few other countries) did not support the idea of a formally structured organization whose agreements would be binding. Thus, in 1948, leaders formed the gatt. The gatt would not be an organization per se, but it would constitute a series of trade conferences that would in turn generate policies on importation and exportation between a large number of countries. The gatt thus became the de facto supranational trade organization.

In addition to looking to questions of postwar trade, those at Bretton Woods knew that significant monies would be required to rebuild a war-torn Europe. Postwar Europe would need to revive its markets and productive capacities; it would require significant loans to recover physical and financial infrastructure. Thus, the Bretton Woods leaders founded two other institutions that today are called the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Like the gatt, these lending institutions would also be supranational bodies. Their missions would be to remain politically neutral as they provided funds to stabilize a postwar Europe.

Under the gatt system, seven sets of negotiations cycled between 1948 and 1994. Each meeting cycle was called a round, and often a round named for a city or country in which the trade meetings took place. The eighth cycle, called the Uruguay Round, began in 1986, just one year after the Confédération Paysanne was born. That year the union watched critically, noting how those participating in the Uruguay Round were seeking to allow wealthy northern nations to expand trade agreements into new areas of production. Those areas would include agriculture, intellectual property rights, and services.

Taking a step back, it is vital to note that the Bretton Woods system is composed of two overlapping phases. As we have just seen, the first phase...
(1948 to 1958, roughly speaking) focused primarily on lending funds to northern industrialized nations for economic recovery. By the end of the 1960s, when this project was largely accomplished, Europe was once again a set of wealthy nations, ready to participate in GATT meetings.

After first assisting Europe in successfully rebuilding itself with funds from the Bretton Woods system, the system had a second objective: to develop southern nonindustrialized nations. The second phase of the Bretton Woods system would prove far more problematic than the first. Again, during the first phase of the Bretton Woods system, nations borrowing monies were relatively equal in term of power. They were also mainly Western nations that had already been using the capitalist system for hundreds of years. Once recovered, European countries quickly reestablished themselves as industrially dominant northern nations. The second phase of the Bretton Woods system, however, is still being played out on an uneven field. During this period (roughly 1958 to the present), the Bretton Woods system has targeted largely agrarian societies in the Global South. Many of these nations, ranging from countries in Africa to southwestern Asia to Latin America, were former colonies of the newly reempowered European nations. Once decolonized, they began their ongoing struggle to establish themselves as autonomous political, economic, and cultural entities. According to many in the alter-globalization movement, the Bretton Woods system failed to support a robust set of newly independent southern nations. Instead, many feel it set in motion a complex economic, political, and cultural dynamic of social inequality that continues today.

To further clarify, it is useful to examine two critical problems that arose during the second postcolonial phase of the Bretton Woods system. Trying to reestablish their own infrastructure, industry, and agricultural systems, impoverished countries borrowed monies from such supranational bodies as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Subsequently, they faced high interest rates, soaring debt, and increased destitution that in turn led their leaders to look to the Bretton Woods system for more monies. As a result, these new debtor nations found themselves unable to sit as equals during international trade negotiations. To address the debt problem, leaders of the Bretton Woods system introduced structural adjustment programs in the late 1970s. Through structural adjustment programs, Bretton Woods agents began to grant new loans or reduce debt—if poor countries would fully capitulate to a neoliberal economic system. Neoliberalism is a term used
to describe an economic system that promotes minimal state intervention in private enterprise. Otherwise stated, a neoliberal approach assumes that state regulation of private corporations hinders a nation’s overall economic growth. According to a neoliberal model, states should reduce as many production or trade-related regulations as possible. While this laissez-faire approach seems reasonable enough to some, to others it enhances social inequality in an era when northern nations seem to benefit substantially more from the system than poor southern nations.

The neoliberal structural adjustment programs ask leaders of poor countries to agree to free market programs that bring about increased privatization, deregulation, and reduced trade barriers. According to many in the Confédération Paysanne, structural adjustment programs are unjust forms of coercion. As Bové says, “Yes, they [the Bretton Woods system] are happy to reduce debt and give help to developing countries [pays en voie de développement], but everyone knows what it really is. It’s blackmail [C’est le chantage]” (personal communication, November 6, 1999). In some cases, powerful institutions require debtor nations to accept trade agreements that lead to the dumping of cheap northern products and services onto their own fledgling economies. Reproductive health also often falls into the purview of structural adjustment, as poor countries are obliged to implement family-planning programs that are often incompatible with local and cultural reproductive practices. Often, powerful institutions compel nations in debt to lower labor or environmental standards for multinational corporations that have set up shop in their countries. Other structural adjustments include debt-for-nature swaps. In such exchanges, Bretton Woods institutions pressure poor countries to trade off crucial natural resources either to lower debt or to increase their access to new loans. Such resources include waterways crucial to agriculture and everyday hydration, fertile land areas, forested areas rich in biodiversity, and tourist-rich shorelines also central to nations’ fishing economies. Issues such as structural adjustment and free trade have been central to the Confédération Paysanne since its inception. Many were concerned when, during the Uruguay Round, leaders of the GATT decided to place staple agricultural products (often referred to as bulk products or grain commodities) into the trade system. Among other things, this meant to union members that increased dumping would occur in the Global South.

Intellectual property agreements would allow biotechnology corporations to further lock in GMOs as a primary form of global agricultural pro-
duction. Agricultural biotechnology depends on intellectual property rights; without such rights, Monsanto, Novartis, Cargill, and other corporations cannot patent their seed-input packages. If unpatented, such products would be available to any manufacturer, and corporations would find it impossible to maintain dominance over the agricultural biotechnology market. The entry of services into the GATT was also of great concern to the Confédération Paysanne. In the 1970s and 1980s, when industrial capitalism underwent a dramatic period of restructuring, union members witnessed the service industry become a primary target for capital accumulation in many wealthy industrialized nations. Many in the union wondered about the future implications of cultural products being owned by private corporations and traded in an international market. Considerable discussion took place in the union regarding the fate of local and cultural autonomy of peoples across the globe.

During the Uruguay Round, the union watched telecommunications services become a lucrative tradable commodity. In turn, the financial sector became a key site for investment as wealthy nations began to build their own banks, lending agencies, accounting firms, and other financial services in other member countries. Entrepreneurs noted the potential for poor countries to become major tourist sites, so the GATT assisted wealthy nations in establishing new forms of rural, urban, and ecotourism services in other countries. Private corporations also targeted transportation as an effective site for commodification. Since the 1980s, privately owned buses, airplanes, and car services have increasingly been sold to both tourists and general publics in new locations around the world. Wealthy nations also began to sell juridical services such as legal training and consultation. At the same time, private companies constructed their own primary, elementary, and secondary schools within poor countries, making profits in the educational sectors there. Private corporations began to put on the market healthcare services around the world as private firms from the north set up high-priced clinics, hospitals, and pharmacies. Unfortunately, many of these state-of-the-art facilities would be accessible only to the elite classes living in poor nations.

Environmental services also emerged as a leading source of revenue for many countries participating in the Uruguay Round. Trade experts put into place international environmental standards and regulations, and private corporations benefited from these policies by creating firms that could sell to poor countries consulting and technical services that would allow them to stay up to code. Prevention-related technologies for flooding, earthquakes, and
droughts are a key set of commodities being sold by wealthy nations around the world. Although the causes of such natural disasters as hurricanes are controversial, many in the alter-globalization movement link these problems with what they call the climate crisis. Whether these disasters are “natural” or created by global warming, many of these events occur within impoverished nations, requiring leaders to look once again to Bretton Woods agencies to help them reduce structural damage and human suffering. Private corporations from wealthy nations also sell to newly industrialized countries services that are designed to curb vehicle emissions, reduce noise, and protect landscapes. Wealthy nations also profit from retailing sewage, refuse, disposal, and sanitation services to poor countries. Certainly, many services sold to impoverished nations are necessary. Yet many in the Confédération Paysanne (and in the alter-globalization movement generally) wondered if a flood of Western service commodities could drown out countries’ abilities to maintain or strengthen their own culturally appropriate and affordable ways of life.

The union’s apprehensions about the Bretton Woods system continued into the 1990s. On April 15, 1994, no one in the union was surprised when members of the gatt met in Mexico to sign the Marrakech Agreement. This agreement finally established a new trade-based institutionalized organization, the wto. While the gatt represented a series of trade meetings that ended in treaties, the wto would constitute a permanent structure that is capable of establishing binding multilateral agreements.

To return to the question of hormone-treated beef, we now have a better understanding of why those in the Confédération Paysanne would react negatively when they learned that the newly refurbished wto had come knocking on their door, so to speak. In 1997, just three years after the creation of the wto, the union was dismayed when the wto changed its policy on hormone-treated beef. The gatt leaders had made a plurilateral agreement that exempted Europe from importing beef treated with hormones, but in 1997 leaders of the wto canceled the exemption, demanding a multilateral agreement.

**THE ORGANIZATION DISCIPLINES EUROPE:**
**NO BEEF, NO ROQUEFORT**

In retaliation for Europe’s refusal to import U.S. hormone-treated beef, the wto placed a heavy surtax on luxury foodstuff, including Roquefort cheese. When French sheep’s milk producers learned that Roquefort cheese
would be included in the list of surtaxed high-end foods, they had reason for deep concern. The cheese already sold in the United States for more than thirty dollars a pound. At nearly ninety dollars a pound, it would become unaffordable to many American retailers, restaurants, and consumers who would normally buy the extravagant cheese. Roquefort is a high-stakes commodity in France. And perhaps most important, the cheese has controlled origin status. This means that it is produced only by sheep farmers in one small region of south-central France called the Avéyron. Like many products of le terroir, Roquefort is central to maintaining the local economy. Today, more than thirteen hundred workers (farmers, processors, and so on) depend on Roquefort that is destined for domestic and foreign markets. A drop in sales could devastate an entire region of the country.

For those unfamiliar with Roquefort, I will give a brief yet inclusive overview of the history and production methods associated with the cheese. The cultural practices and meanings surrounding Roquefort offer insight into the reasons why it is so valued by many members of French society. In France, Roquefort is known as “the king of cheeses.” The term Roquefort is derived from the region’s ancient local dialect, Occitan, which calls the cheese rocafort. The cheese is white, with a texture that is both creamy and slightly crumbly. Running through the cheese are its famous threads of blue-black mold that pack the cheese with an unparalleled tangy punch. Unlike many French cheeses, Roquefort has no rind and every part of its wheel is edible. In general, wheels of Roquefort weigh between two and three kilograms and are ten centimeters thick.

The cheese dates back to 79 AD. In 1411, King Charles vi granted the people of what was then called the Region of Roquefort a monopoly over the cheese. He determined that a cheese could only be called Roquefort if it had ripened in the region’s unique caves. Centuries later, in 1925, Roquefort became the first French product to achieve controlled origin status. This means producers must conform to a strict set of protocols to make a cheese branded with the Roquefort label. Controlled origin status guarantees a select group of French farmers the right to label and sell the cheese, preventing others from copying or imitating the product for a lower price. Roquefort embodies notions of le terroir, the distinctive culinary and geographical dimension associated with particular regions in France. When combined with the traditional savoir faire of the French artisanal producer, terroir wines, cheese,
or pâtés attain the status of products of French high culture (Hervieu 1996b, 24). The idea of terroir means that for champagne to receive controlled origin status, it can only be produced in the Champagne region. Burgundy wines can only be produced from grapes grown in Bourgogne.

Roquefort can only be produced by using the milk of sheep that have grazed on grasses from the south-central regions of France known as the Aquitaine, Languedoc, the Pyrenees, Provence, and Corsica. The cave walls of Mont Comblaou (where the cheeses age) are marked with porous streaks, known as *fleurines*. These caverns allow an inimitable form of ventilation necessary for the cheese’s maturation. The caves also sustain a temperature of about 50 degrees Celsius, and 95 percent humidity. Roquefort is spotted with *Penicillium roqueforti*. The mold itself is a cultural artifact, centuries old, imbuing the cheese with its distinctive “stinky” savor. Roquefort producers cultivate this mold by placing loaves of wheat and rye bread onto planks in the humid caves. After several weeks, the producers scrape mold from the bread and subsequently inject it into the cheese. In addition, other mold spores float into the cave, blowing through the fleurines, fixing themselves to the cheese. Once the Roquefort producer has cultivated the cheese with mold, he or she mixes it with salt. The young cheese then sits on old oak planks for a minimum of three months. Once it is fully ripe, Roquefort producers wrap the cheese in foil to prevent it from contacting air.

I relate these details because many people in the United States are unaware of the rich set of cultural practices associated with the cheese. In fact, I have found that many in the country confuse Roquefort with the idea of blue cheese in general, often using the terms *Roquefort* and *blue cheese* interchangeably. What many Americans do not know is that blue cheese is any cheese made from the milk of cows, goats, or sheep that is cultured with the mold *Penicillium*. Blue cheeses are usually speckled or streaked with blue, gray, or green mold, and they generally have a salty pungent flavor. Since the term *blue cheese* is simply a descriptor for a generic category of cheese, it can be produced by any individual, in any part of the world. Blue cheese has no relation to any combination of particular climates, soil, grasses, milk, mold, or caves. Because the United States annually imports about 440 tons of Roquefort, this market is crucial to Roquefort cheese producers. The professional association of Roquefort producers met with Jean Glavany, France’s minister of agriculture, to appeal for help. Glavany responded that he was
powerless to reverse the WTO’s decision and promised only to do what he
could to pay for a publicity campaign that might help the farmers’ cause
(Bové 2001, 93).

Along with other farmers in local sheep’s milk associations, Bové de-
cided to take action. The paysans planned a direct action that would hope-
fully draw France’s attention to the trade policies of both Clinton and the
WTO. After learning that a McDonald’s restaurant was in the initial stages
of construction in Millau (a small town in the Avéron), the paysans deter-
mined the site as good as any for a direct action. Congregating at the con-
struction site, the paysans symbolically sabotaged the building under con-
struction. While some hammered away at a few tiles on the half-finished red
roof, others pulled down the construction sign. With signature Confédé-
ration Paysanne humor, the activists said to the press on location that day
that they were “dismantling” (démontant) the restaurant the way one would
carefully dismantle a bomb. Despite the metaphor, Bové later described the
action as having a light and congenial feeling. Families with young children
picnicked on the rocky grounds of the construction lot. Meanwhile other
paysans held an informal presentation for a few members of the local press
who had decided to show up that day.

For many, particularly those outside Avéron (and beyond France), the
dismantling was confusing. Why, many wondered, would sheep’s milk pro-
ducers protest a McDonald’s? Was the union simply expressing an anti-
American spirit by protesting a symbol associated with the United States?
In press releases and interviews, Bové and others tried to articulate the links
between hormone-treated beef sold by the U.S.-based McDonald’s, and the
exorbitant export tax on Roquefort cheese that could devastate the local
community. According to Bové, “We tried to make it clear: it was indus-
trialized agriculture against local artisanal agriculture. We were protest-
ing a symbol of industrialized agriculture, not the U.S.” (personal communica-
tion, June 19, 2000). Here we have two nonhuman actors at play. On the one
hand, hormone-treated beef summons negative sentiments about industrial
agriculture. On the other hand, Roquefort cheese wafts up generally positive
regional and national feelings about nonindustrial agriculture. Roquefort
did many things that day at the McDonald’s construction site. In addition to
catalyzing activists to remove tiles from the building’s roof, paysans painted
the slogan “McDo Defora—Gardarem Roquefort!” (McDo out, Roquefort
in!) across the building’s half-built roof. The paysans wrote their slogan in
Occitan, a southern dialect of the traditional region known as Languedoc. Since the 1980s, it has been popular for activists in the southwest to voice political demands in Occitan. While some elders in the community were still familiar with Occitan, the dialect had been virtually driven out of circulation by national educational efforts in the postwar era. Occitan thus came to constitute a symbol of regional and local identity against national or international powers (Lem 1999, 18).

The cultural and biological flair of Roquefort cheese also had the power to draw upon networks established more than twenty years earlier during the Larzac movement. When Bové and other farmers in associations for sheep’s milk producers announced the action, they were not surprised when three hundred paysans—and supporters—showed up at the McDonald’s that day in mid-August. August is a period in France when much of the nation enjoys its summer vacation. Bové did not make the McDo action take place on his own. It was Bové and his symmetrical ally, Roquefort. The action brought together people from the original Larzac struggle while also embodying the sensibility of the Larzac. Farmers stood side by side with nonfarmers, fighting a power they perceived as instrumental. In the minds of the paysans that day, they were fighting state power that once reduced farmland to military bases and food to industrial commodities.

“ONLY AMERICANS WOULD TREAT A UNION MAN LIKE THAT!”

When I explain my research topic to friends in the United States, many say, “Oh yeah, I heard about the French guy who drove his tractor into a McDonald’s.” When I ask where they heard this story, they will reply by saying something like, “I read it in the papers.” After which they’ll continue, “Can you imagine what it must have felt like sitting there eating a hamburger as this guy plows into your table? He should have been put away for life!” I have heard many such comments over the years. Slowly Bové’s story morphed into a kind of international urban legend. Such narratives reflect two things: a predilection in the United States for stories about crazed, lone individuals committing odd crimes in strange places, and a lack of understanding in the United States about the plight of small farmers generally. Just as no tractor ever plowed into a McDonald’s restaurant, the lead character in the McDo tale was not a guy going postal. In recent U.S. history, popular imagination is indeed fixated on the figure of the alienated indi-
individual (usually male) disenchanted by society who just loses it and commits a senseless and destructive crime. This individual is often depicted as roiling with rage, gunning down ordinary people in schoolrooms, post offices, and workplaces before placing a pistol between his own teeth. But in the French McDo story, there is neither violence nor a solitary irrational individual. The main characters in this story are union farmers who, in French society, are generally granted degrees of respect and asylum from harsh punishment.

French farmers from the fnsea are known for breaking windows of public buildings and blockading highways for hours with piles of smoldering tires. These events are widely depicted on the nightly news. Yet rarely do fnsea members leave the scene with more than a slap on the proverbial wrist. The day after such an action, fnsea leaders find themselves sitting in tidy government offices, engaging in rounds of negotiations with powerful policymaking bodies. Few French citizens will pass picket lines, and even fewer would approve the harsh treatment of unionized workers demonstrating for fair wages or prices.

It is this cultural context that makes the story of Bové’s arrest and imprisonment so remarkable. After conducting farms of the future in McDonald’s restaurants for years without ever receiving a serious charge, Bové and his local community were shocked when he and several others were arrested and jailed for conducting this particular demonstration. According to Bové, the severe charges were not merely the result of the McDo action. Instead the charges served as retaliation on behalf of a young new judge in Millau. This judge had been presiding throughout the summer of 1999, a summer of, in the judge’s estimation, an unending series of paysan-led crop pulls topped off by the Montpelier rice affair. Determined to punish Bové for the anti-gmo actions, the judge ordered Bové and the six others under arrest an unusually high bail and charge (José Bové, personal communication, October 27, 1999). Unknowingly, the judge’s actions set in motion a surprising chain of events that forever transformed the French gmo debate, putting Bové and the Confédération Paysanne on the international map along the way.

When the bail orders were actually served, Bové and his family were vacationing in southern France. Upon his return a week later, Bové learned that he would have to wait for up to one week in the local prison for his bail hearing. After fulfilling his one-week stay, he was informed that the bail would be twenty-five thousand dollars—a sum the union would be obliged to pay in order for him to be released. Bové decided to remain in jail for two more
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weeks to await a second hearing at which the judge would determine the
charges. As Bové reflects, “I figured I’d already spent a week [in prison], I
might as well wait another two for the charge hearing. . . . Besides, I’d real-
ized that we were getting pretty good media by my being in there.” The
French press widely covered the story of Bové’s sentencing, jail stay, and
unusually high bail. This news hit a cultural nerve that, within weeks, cata-
pulted Bové to the status of national martyr and hero in the French and inter-
don’t like to see a farmer or a union man put in jail like that for such a small
thing. They saw the high bail and charges as being more like the American
system. They said, ‘That’s how Americans do it, and we’re not Americans’”
(personal communication, October 27, 1999).

Another nonhuman actor became central to the anti-gmo network: a
photograph of a smiling Bové with handcuffed fists raised above his head.
This photograph was made possible by a local police officer who was lead-
ing Bové from a police car to prison. The officer charged with this task was
a local who knew Bové personally and was sympathetic to his cause. In the
police car, Bové had asked the officer to remove the cuffs from where they
were bound behind his back. He explained that if bound in the front, he
could raise his cuffed hands for the media waiting outside the police car.
Bové knew what a splendid picture this would make (José Bové, personal
communication, October 29, 1999). This photograph hit the front page of
many national and international newspapers and appeared in television re-
ports. The photograph was an actant in the fullest sense of the word. It acted
upon the French public, stimulating sympathy, moral indignation, and na-
tional pride at the sight of a French union man and paysan, grinning with
dignity in the face of national and international authorities. Had the photo-
graph been a lackluster snapshot of Bové being shoved into a car with hands
behind his back, it might have produced an entirely different set of cultural
meanings.

McDo and Gmos: Tying the Two Together

With the help of Roquefort and the photograph, Bové was suddenly re-
nowned for the McDo action rather than the gmo issue. He then decisively
determined to seize the opportunity to advance both causes. While Bové
did not explicitly attempt to counter science hegemony associated with risk
discourse, he explained to me that he wanted to illustrate the links between
gmos and globalization. As Bové explained, “In every interview after McDo, I would talk about gmos. . . . It was an opportunity to make that link clear in people’s minds, that gmos and McDo were really two aspects of the same problem[,]. . . . that multinationals, the WTO, that capitalism, are controlling everything from culture to food” (personal communication, October 29, 1999). Drawing on both paysan and alter-globalization discourses, Bové continued to reframe gmos and McDo as examples of “globalization and a decline in quality of food and life both in France and throughout the world.”

The success of the McDo action in bringing the Confédération Paysanne national attention led the union, on an organizational level, to more publicly endorse and promote the anti-gmo campaign first spearheaded by Bové and Riesel. Bové’s public endorsement by the Confédération Paysanne and by the key French anti-globalization group ATTAC also marked the beginning of the end of the Bové-Riesel duo. Upon his return from India a week after the McDo incident, Riesel was dismayed by what he perceived as “a serious change in the strategy and discourse” that the two had been developing for the two previous years (Riesel, personal interview, November 2, 1999). Within weeks following the McDo action, Riesel publicly resigned from the Confédération Paysanne, explicitly distancing himself from Bové. Riesel expressed his disappointment about the McDo affair in an open letter to Bové during Bové’s imprisonment. He later published a book that, as he said to me, sharply criticized Bové for “selling out the anti-gmo campaign to Confédération Paysanne moderates and to the reformist alter-globalizationists as well” (personal communication, November 8, 1999).

As Riesel receded from the public GMO controversy, Bové rose to become the central figure associated with both the French anti-gmo and anti-globalization movements. To this day, few are aware that Riesel was at one time a main force in the union’s campaign. In the spotlight, Bové largely succeeded in reshaping the debate. Scientific risk still clearly remained a key frame for thinking about the technology. Yet, increasingly, the media, activist groups, public researchers, and even government officials broadened their discourse. They included in their gmo narratives questions ranging from biological patents and the fate of small farmers in France to the homogenization of cultures globally by neoliberal-style capitalism. Many even tied the question of gmos to the WTO.

Bové had become a cultural folk hero domestically and internationally, symbolizing French resistance to perceived processes of commodification in
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domains of food, language, music, and business. The media often drew attention to Bové’s hybrid identity as the son of French scientists and a paysan. Journalists, industry officials, and government agents often challenged his status as a real paysan. Despite these disputes regarding his real identity, Bové enjoyed tremendous acceptance by the French public. After 1999, Bové became a key figure in the French and international alter-globalization movement, speaking and organizing in countries from Mexico to Brazil, and he accepted a post as a regional director in La Via Campesina in 2000. Perhaps most interesting is that he soon became a hero to many in the U.S. alter-globalization movement. He was celebrated mightily in the United States just months after his release from prison.

LA MALBOUFFE: SYMBOL OF TASTELESS GLOBALIZATION

Bové’s rise to stardom was accompanied by an unusual anti-gmo discourse that strengthened his position as key spokesperson for national and international anti-gmo and alter-globalization networks. The centerpiece of Bové’s discourse was *la malbouffe*, literally meaning “bad food,” which he equated with gmos, McDo, and all products of globalized culture and industrialized agriculture. *La malbouffe* is a slang term that translates imperfectly into “bad chow” or “junk food.” For Bové, the term symbolizes everything distasteful about globalization, ranging from the cultural homogenization associated with McDonald’s fast food to the industrialized agriculture associated with hormone-treated beef or gmos.

While popularized in France with Bové, the term *la malbouffe* itself was coined in 1981 by Stella and Joel de Rosnay in a short and little-known book titled *La malbouffe* (1981). Bové, a self-taught scholar in the politics of food, had read the book years before 1999 and invoked the term during and after the McDo action for lack of a better word. To uncover the more subtle meanings of Bové’s *la malbouffe*, we must first understand the meaning of *la bouffe* itself, an affectionate colloquial term referring to food in general, from which the English word *buffet* is derived. *La bouffe*, bringing together notions of pleasure, tradition, and French cuisine, really has no translation in English.

To be cultured in France is to be cultivated, or to have good taste. The meaning of taste is of course twofold, as both food and people may be understood as being cultivated or tasteful. While a food is well cultivated when it is produced according to regional agricultural traditions, a cultivated individual is capable of recognizing and taking pleasure in food considered cul-

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tured and good tasting. Within this cultural-culinary universe, la malbouffe represents the antithesis of cultural pleasure and cultivation. It signals that which is not traditionally cultivated, that which lacks cultural expertise and history — and thus that which has no taste (literally and figuratively). By pronouncing McDo, G\textit{M}Os, and hormone-treated beef as incidents of la malbouffe, Bové created a story. He generated a salient symbolic synthesis of the cultural and agricultural features of globalization gone wrong. And by looking at this story through the lens of symmetry, we see that McDo, G\textit{M}Os, hormone-treated beef, and the photograph of Bové in handcuffs also worked to coproduce the celebrity of Bové.

In referring to la malbouffe, Bové invokes and solidifies his agricultural authority and cultural expertise. As a producer of sheep’s milk for Roquefort cheese, Bové is linked to an actant that is a particularly potent cultural symbol. Roquefort integrates notions of biology, geography, and cultural expertise. As a product of le terroir, the cheese embraces all parts of the artisanal process, from the bacterial cultures used in Roquefort production to the historical cultures of local farmers. Reflecting upon the evocative power of le terroir and of Roquefort in particular, Bové asserted wryly, “Clinton made a big mistake when he chose to mess with Roquefort. He didn’t know what he was dealing with. It means something to French people” (personal communication, October 29, 1999). By proclaiming G\textit{M}Os an instance of la malbouffe, Bové translated a debate about scientific risk into an overtly political debate about food quality, paysan survival, and neoliberal trade policy. In so doing, he shifted the site of discursive authority from the objective and scientific risk expert standing outside culture and history to the intensely engaged paysan expert standing for culture and history.

\textit{Conclusion}

The historic anti-McDo action that took place in the southern French town of Millau did not just happen out of the blue. In this case, we see how tensions between public scientists, private corporations, and peasants from France and India snowballed into an impressive force that led a local judge in Millau to harshly punish paysans for their anti-G\textit{M}O and anti-McDo activities.

From his prison cell, Bové asserted the contradiction between instrumentalized agricultural products such as hormone-treated beef and McDo ham-
burgers and artisanal and traditional products such as Roquefort cheese. In so doing, he laid bare the clash between an instrumental and solidaire rationality of agriculture.

For the heirs of the Larzac legacy, Roquefort symbolized a logic of solidarity that brought farmers and nonfarmers together to fight against militarization, privatization, and political domination generally. Roquefort stood for quality food and the right of the world’s smallholders to work together to protect both food and a paysan way of life.