Food, Farms, and Solidarity

Heller, Chaia

Published by Duke University Press

Heller, Chaia.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/70573

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2543172
The Confédération Paysanne’s voyage to the United States represented a major media success. Before, during, and after the delegation’s trip, the French press was saturated with visual images and printed texts. Providing a steady flood of information, journalists portrayed the union as playing a central role in the U.S. and international alter-globalization movement. Bové continued to be followed by “our paparazzi,” who, by the time we arrived in Seattle, had incorporated themselves into the group. These journalists often dined with the delegation, joining Confédération Paysanne farmers in the small hotel lobby, where they tended to stay up late, rolling and smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee or wine, and exchanging endless humorous tales. This group of French and international journalists had continuous and intimate access to Bové’s comings and goings. Each day during the voyage and for weeks after, they sent print and visual media around the world, amplifying the union’s presence in the United States.
Chapter Nine

A Little Anti-McDo in Seattle?

Upon entering the streets of Seattle, one of the first things that the delegation noticed was several McDonald’s restaurants boarded up as if prepared for a hurricane. The group paused before a group of workmen nailing stray slabs of particleboard across the building’s windows. One member of the delegation asked if I would tell the workmen that he was arrested in Millau for “the original” anti-McDo action. “Also tell him that is the real Bové,” the paysan added, pointing to Bové, who was smoking his pipe and squinting up at the boarded windows. After my translation, the workmen laughed and scrutinized our motley group of generally friendly-looking people. “You’re the guys who tore down the McDonald’s in France?” asked a young man with blond shaggy hair, jeans, and a tool belt. The young man informed the rest of the crew, who in turn stared at the delegation in wonder: “Wow, you guys are pretty cool. Good work!”

TO McDO OR NOT McDO?

The McDonald’s corporation was not the only one alerted to Bové’s arrival in Seattle. Several grassroots alter-globalization groups had also heard the news and expressed hope that Bové might stage another anti-McDonald’s action in the city. These groups had learned of the McDonald’s action over the Internet in various alter-globalization networks; Bové was already a budding celebrity in the small but active U.S. anti-gmo and alter-globalization movements. Many had seen the famous photo of Bové in shackles in Leftist magazines or on the Internet.

Through my affiliation with the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont, I had ties to a main organizing group in Seattle that week called the Direct Action Network. Brooke Lehman, a key organizer in the Direct Action Network, was an alumna of the Institute for Social Ecology. As an antiauthoritarian organization, the Direct Action Network was planning a nonviolent civil-disobedience protest to take place the morning the WTO meetings were to begin. The Confédération Paysanne, the National Family Farm Coalition, La Via Campesina, and many other groups were traveling to Seattle with the objective of acting as witnesses to the WTO meetings. The organization Public Citizen worked with other U.S. groups to prepare legal protest activities that would include an evening rally featuring high-profile speakers such as Michael Moore, Ralph Nader, and Bové. Public Citizen, along with other
groups, also planned other popular events. The morning the trade meetings were to begin, organizers coordinated a gigantic rally to take place in a sports dome that featured central representatives of the alter-globalization movement, such as Vandana Shiva and Professor Swami, members of the National Family Farm Coalition, representatives of various indigenous groups, and U.S. trade unionists. After the morning rally, a massive march took place. Groups of farmers, indigenous peoples, trade unionists, ecology organizations, and alter-globalization activists from all over the world spent at least two hours marching together.

During my week in Seattle, I carried my tape recorder everywhere, often asking activists what had brought them to Seattle and how they saw the WTO. One young woman from Iowa City encapsulated the voices of many when she said, “We’re here to show that the world is watching. To show that the WTO is an unjust institution and its members can’t just meet behind closed doors, making decisions that oppress people and hurt the environment.” Like this woman, many expressed their wish to demonstrate global resistance to an organization they saw as corrupt, unethical, and ruinous to local economies the world over.

Many groups in Seattle had come to participate in legal forums such as city-approved rallies, marches, and press conferences set up by reform-oriented organizations. Yet according to an activist I knew from the United States, more radical groups were going to Seattle to engage in illegal protest that would assume the form of civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is a protest form that is generally, though not always, nonviolent. Some trace the idea back to Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Civil Disobedience,” written in 1848. Thoreau articulated the idea that citizens have a moral responsibility to demonstrate against laws, taxes, and other state practices (such as slavery or war) that they see as unjust. For Thoreau, when citizens do not take a stand against the immoral actions of their government, they fail to demonstrate civic accountability. Gandhi was not the first to deploy civil disobedience when he led thousands during the Indian struggle for independence from the British Empire. Yet for many, the Gandhian model serves as the prototype for nonviolent civil-disobedience action.

Illegally refusing to pay taxes or abide by draft laws and or participating in illegal boycotts are instances of civil disobedience. Others are designed to interrupt, sabotage, or prevent the functioning of powerful institutions, such as state offices, corporations, science bodies, or universities. By engaging in
sit-ins, for instance, activists use their bodies to form human blockades. Such blockades can prevent the passing of military vehicles, police cars, state officials, or corporate agents. Often, sit-ins are conducted at crucial intersections of major cities in order to stop “business as usual” and draw media attention to an issue. In some sit-ins, activists create a circle on the ground by linking arms or using bicycle locks or chains to bind one person to another. The latter strategy is used when activists want to slow down the arrest process, because police are obliged to slowly and carefully use saws to separate activists before arresting and removing them. In the United States, activists in the civil rights movement practiced civil disobedience, and in the 1960s other associated groups took up the strategy, especially for the antiwar movement. Activists would consciously commit illegal but nonviolent crimes in order to raise awareness of social injustice. Civil disobedience is also a strategy used often by members of the Confédération Paysanne and by their predecessors in the Larzac movement. Acts of civil disobedience ranged from squatting illegally on farmland and conducting farms of the future in McDonald’s restaurants to pulling up crops of genetically modified organisms and sabotaging greenhouses.

Weeks before leaving for the United States, I received a call from Brooke Lehman, a member of the Direct Action Network in New York City. Lehman had been a student of mine at the Institute for Social Ecology. Aware that I was accompanying the Confédération Paysanne to Seattle, Lehman asked if I would invite Bové to participate in a civil-disobedience action that week in Seattle. “It would be great if it could be directed at McDonald’s,” Lehman said. Lehman also inquired about the possibility of Bové giving a talk at the convergence center created by the Direct Action Network (a space for activists from around the world to receive a variety of services). Determined to maintain my ethnographic stance, I explained to Lehman that the purpose of my trip to Seattle was to serve as translator for the delegation. In addition, I would be there to observe and participate with the group rather than direct their activities. I could thus neither ask Bové to do an anti-McDo action nor ask him to give a speech at the convergence center.

Based in New York City, the Direct Action Network brought together antiauthoritarian groups from across the country. The Direct Action Network had rented an empty building in Seattle two months prior to the protests. Lehman and other activists had been hard at work to create the convergence center. The center would offer space for presentations by key
movement figures and hold workshops to prepare for upcoming direct actions. In addition, it would offer teach-ins and civil-disobedience trainings for the out-of-town activists expected to pour in. Other services to be offered included free vegetarian meals, medical treatment (at a small but impressive impromptu infirmary), legal advice for activists before and after potential arrests, activist meeting space, and a large space where artists could construct banners, signs, and enormous puppets in the style of Bread and Puppet of Vermont.

My role in Seattle was to observe and provide translation for the delegation. Yet just hours after our arrival in Seattle, Bové inquired about a civil disobedience he heard was planned for the first morning of the trade meetings. I explained to him, as best as I could, the history and composition of the Direct Action Network, which was planning the action. I told him that it was indeed possible that civil-disobedience action might be more thoroughly covered by the media than the legal rallies and marches. Unfamiliar with the U.S. political grassroots landscape, Bové would never have chosen to join a group he knew nothing of. A careful strategist, Bové sought instead to build upon ties with a known entity, like Public Citizen. Associated with Ralph Nader, Public Citizen was founded in 1971 as a lobbying group. By addressing the executive branch of government, the Congress, and the courts, Public Citizen has contested unethical practices of the pharmaceutical, nuclear, and automobile industries, among others. Having recently focused on issues of social justice related to trade policies, Public Citizen was an appropriate U.S.-based organization for the Confédération Paysanne to affiliate with. As a broad-based advocacy group, Public Citizen tended to avoid direct connections with explicitly antiauthoritarian groups such as the Direct Action Network. When learning of the Direct Action Network, Bové said that the group was probably unknown or riotous, constituting an isolated and potentially destructive organization. Like many in Seattle that week, Bové had no idea that the Direct Action Network would prove to be a nonviolent organization capable of mobilizing considerable media and political action. It was indeed the Direct Action Network’s civil-disobedience action that played a key role in making the Seattle protests a historic event. If it were not for this civil-disobedience action in Seattle, the Confédération Paysanne’s anti-GMO and antineoliberal message would have been barely heard across the world.

It was not just the Direct Action Network that sought to help organize an anti-McDonald’s event for Bové and Dufour in Seattle. Public Citizen
organizers also recognized the potential impact of creating an event that would highlight the plight of small-scale farmers related to international trade. Yet Bové and Dufour were concerned that such an action could reinforce the anti-American image still perpetuated by the mainstream media in the United States. Such a protest, they feared, might lead to an arrest and deportation. While the idea of arrest was not disturbing per se to the two longtime activists, timing was everything. An early arrest could prevent them from participating in and observing the trade meetings or meeting with other groups, including La Via Campesina and Peoples’ Global Action. The two paysans also worried that an anti-McDonald’s action could send a confusing message to the international media. The McDonald’s construction site in Millau had provided the union with a local strategic symbol of global capitalism and industrial agribusiness. Now in Seattle, Bové and the Confédération Paysanne had come to directly protest neoliberal free trade and its implications for small farmers across the globe, using the broadest terms possible. Bové and Dufour considered the matter thoroughly. After much deliberation, they agreed to participate in a small and nonviolent demonstration in front of a McDonald’s. But they asked that the demonstration be legal, sending a clear internationalist message.

At noon on the delegation’s second day in Seattle, the group sauntered over to a McDonald’s designated as a good site for a small-scale demonstration. The original plan was for Bové and Dufour to deliver short speeches about gmos and food quality to passersby. While they were speaking, the rest of us in the delegation would hand out slices of bread and Roquefort to any who might stop and listen. As the delegation approached the restaurant, they suspected that a much bigger event was about to unfold. Tacked to a telephone poll by a bus stop, Bové spotted a large poster announcing “The Demonstration”:

**FAMED FRENCH FARMER JOSÉ BOVÉ TO WARN CONSUMERS OF BIOTECHNOLOGY, WTO AT SEATTLE**

McDonald’s. José Bové, Jailed in France for Destroying a McDonald’s, to Speak at Peaceful Press Conference with Farmers from Asia, Africa, Latin America, U.S. and Europe. Speakers to Condemn McDonald’s “Frankenfoods” Bio-engineered French Fries, Beef Treated with Hormones and Antibiotics. Bové to Serve His High Quality Roquefort—Cheese Was Heavily Taxed by U.S. in Retaliation For European Ban on U.S. Hormone Beef.
Operation Roquefort, Part II

Looking up at the sign, members of the delegation frowned. “Public Citizen said the action would be a small thing,” Bové said curtly. “But look at this, a poster making it sound like a major event.” As he spoke, a bit of irritation curled from his lips as he clenched his pipe with his mouth. When the delegation arrived at the McDonald’s, Bové and Dufour stood before the doors of the restaurant, each one taking a microphone handed to them by a Public Citizen organizer. Within minutes, a crowd of about one hundred activists appeared. Upon seeing the group of activists, a paysan from the delegation said, “We definitely won’t have enough Roquefort for everyone.” About ten minutes later, the crowd had grown sizably. Activists were circling around Bové and Dufour so tightly that the delegation’s journalists could barely reach a vantage point from which to snap pictures or shoot video. Five minutes after that, the crowd swelled to about four hundred. Within the din of the expanding crowd, no one could hear Bové’s and Dufour’s respective speeches about neoliberalism, unfair trade, GMOs, and the fight against junk food. Public Citizen organizers recognized the need for a more substantial stage for Bové and Dufour. They also realized that Bové and Dufour were in danger of being accidentally squashed by the adoring mob quickly moving in. “Get them out of there!” a Public Citizen organizer cried. Grabbing his cell phone, the organizer called for a van.

I was standing in the crowd, pushed against the boarded-up McDonald’s, leaning into Bové and Dufour, feeling claustrophobic. Suddenly, I noticed Public Citizen organizers grab Bové and Dufour. The organizers protectively muscled them away from the McDonald’s, through the crowd, and finally to an adjacent street corner where a light-blue van stood waiting. Inside the vehicle were Swami from the Karnataka State Farmers’ Union and John Kinsmen and Bill Christison of the National Family Farm Coalition. Public Citizen organizers had summoned these leaders hoping that they too could be incorporated into what was steadily becoming a major demonstration and media event.

Public Citizen organizers, as well as other members of the delegation, became a ragtag security force, maintaining a ring around the van, providing journalists and organizers room to move. Suddenly, someone inside the van had a great idea. A Public Citizen organizer opened the skylight on the van’s roof, assisting each farmer to climb up and through, transforming the van’s
roof into a stage. It was quickly determined that the van’s roof could hold only four bodies, which meant that there would be no room for me to join the paysans to translate. Since Dufour spoke no English at all, he opted out. “You go,” he said to his friend. This meant that Bové would be speaking publicly for the first time without a translator. Bové was the last farmer to climb out of the skylight. When the crowd of more than a thousand demonstrators recognized Bové, they applauded and cheered wildly. They clearly recognized him by his handlebar moustache and pipe, having seen images of him in stories about Millau. Although unfamiliar with the faces of Swami and farmers from the National Family Farm Coalition, the crowd celebrated the four men. In unison, people began a little cheer, shouting over and over, “Hey, hey, ho ho, farmers rule, not the WTO!” The farmers on the van’s roof that day made history. Small-scale farmers were actually capturing the attention of alter-globalization activists gathered from across the United States—and from across the world. The farmers were now key symbols of the many who are oppressed by neoliberal trade policy. Perhaps for the first time in U.S. history, small-scale farmers were being regarded as national and international heroes.

This was certainly not the first time a farmer had attracted national attention in the United States. In the 1970s, César Chávez impressed the American public when he organized a workers’ strike and grape boycott in California that lasted five years. But the heroes in the Chávez story were exploited farmworkers whose invisible labors were the very engine that drove industrial agriculture. Like Chávez, Bové framed his struggle in terms of labor. He too brought the plight of oppressed farmers into the public arena. Yet while Bové was a small-scale farmer fighting agribusiness, Chávez was a farmworker who owned no land. Chávez was a labor leader, speaking out for farmworkers’ rights, especially fair wages and decent living and working conditions. Framing his struggle in a civil rights rubric, Chávez won popular support in the United States at a time when the public was receptive to discourses on civil rights deployed by Martin Luther King Jr. In 1962, along with the activist Dolores Huerta, Chávez cofounded the National Farm Workers Association, which later became the United Farm Workers. This union is the first and largest agricultural organization, active in ten states throughout the country.

While Chávez became a symbol of the exploitation of farmworkers by industrial agriculture, Bové stood for small-scale farmers fighting to end
the industrial model entirely. There is an interesting racializing discourse at play here. Chávez and many leaders in the union he cofounded are Mexican Americans and other exploited ethnic minorities. Since that brief period in the 1970s, the U.S. public has not generally imagined the “American farmer” as a person of color. Members of the National Family Farm Coalition are nearly all white. Yet they are certainly not wealthy. White small-scale farmers are generally not as exploited as migrant and other farm laborers in agribusiness. Yet they too are marginalized by the system that promotes industrial agriculture. Seeing the coalition farmers John Kinsmen and Bill Christison standing side by side with members of farm unions in France and India sent a clear message. In Seattle that day, the farmers spoke out for the rights of small-scale farmers struggling to survive in a postindustrial agricultural landscape.

While Chávez successfully captured public attention for his cause, he was a man whose ideas were ahead of his time. In the 1960s and 1970s, when industrial agriculture was ascending as a powerful institution, the U.S. public was not yet sensitized to questions of food quality or production scale associated with agriculture. Americans did not yet understand agriculture as a global system that presents a range of problems that extend well beyond questions of workers’ rights. Chávez did shed light on the plight of farmworkers, but the public could not frame agriculture in broader terms as it has in recent years. Even today, the agricultural issue is still generally consumer based, focusing on alternative food discourses such as organic, vegetarian, or vegan foodstuffs (Heller 1999).

Yet the farmers standing on the van’s roof that day were helping the public link consumer issues related to food to humanistic and cultural issues associated with small-scale agriculture. As Bové said to me after that day, “People need to see that paysans are real people. If they want good food, quality food, they must support our cause.” The crowd assembled in Seattle included an eclectic mix of activists and ordinary citizens who had come to have their say about the state of democracy in corporate America, and the state of global finance generally (see Graeber 2002, 2009). Dotted throughout the crowd was also a smattering of black-clad anarchists, including a small group from Portland, Oregon, dressed in anarchist regalia and identifying with members of the German Autonomen movement of the 1980s. In Europe, when many organizations come together to participate in a political march, they form blocs, or groups, with each group wearing a T-shirt of a
Chapter Nine

particular color. Members of the Autonomen wore black clothes, invoking the black flag associated with anarchism. This is the source of the term *black block* used by anarchists in the United States, who often wear black hats, face coverings, clothes, and shoes when they march (Steinmetz 1994, 61).

Anti-gmo activists were there that day as well. Many were festooned in what had become the iconic anti-gmo outfits. Many wore creative costumes, with some dressed as monarch butterflies, invoking a study by U.S. scientists that showed that monarch butterflies suffered a range of physical problems after ingesting pollen from gm crops. In addition, there was the iconic symbol of the gmo: half fish, half strawberry—a reference to one of the first experimental field trials from years before in California. There were also members of the United Steelworkers of America union, members of indigenous groups, and ordinary U.S. citizens, young and old, concerned about the status of the world’s food supply.

Seizing the moment, Bové took the microphone and gazed deep into the crowd, flashing his humble yet mischievous smile. In one hand, Bové held up a large slice of Roquefort cheese; in the other hand, a chunk of bread. Holding the bread and cheese over his head, he boomed into the microphone using his increasingly confident English: “I am a sheep farmer from France and we bring you good Roquefort cheese. . . . We don’t want to eat hormone beef and gmo. Americans must not be punished because of Clinton and the wto. Americans, too, have a right to good food. They should not be forced to only eat gmo, McDonald’s, and hormone-treated beef. Together we must fight for no more gmo! And tomorrow, at the rally and march, we will do this nonviolently.” Delirious with delight, the crowd chanted, “Hey hey, ho ho, gmos have got to go!” Such “ho ho, got to go” chants, I have noted, were first heard at U.S. gay and lesbian pride marches during the early 1980s. The repeating ‘ho’ sound in ‘ho ho, homophobia has got to go’ proved catchy indeed. Hey-Hey, Ho-Ho chants became popularized during a period when activists were fighting for research on hiv/aids. Out of curiosity, I asked about thirty crowd members whether they knew the origin of this chant form. Not one person had any idea. The chant had been reformulated to speak to the issues in Seattle that day.

On top of the van, pipe in hand, Bové broke bread with the other farmers, holding wedges of Roquefort toward the sky as the crowd roared below, spreading out for blocks. As Bové spoke, the delegation fanned out into the crowd, each of us passing out hundreds of slices of bread smeared with
Roquefort. Once again, Roquefort continued its work as a key nonhuman actor, this time creating connections between French activists and U.S. demonstrators intent on learning more about the future of food. The Roquefort acted wildly, shooting invisible arrows of bacterial culture into the olfactory systems of surrounding activists. As we offered Roquefort and bread to smiling demonstrators, they tended to laugh and take the bread, looking slightly confused. “What is this?” demonstrators would ask, smelling the bread with a bit of trepidation. “Why blue cheese?” Aware that most people are unaccustomed to eating food provided by complete strangers, I did my best to explain, at the prodding of delegation members. “It’s Roquefort,” I explained. “It’s a special kind of cheese produced by Bové and other French sheep farmers. The U.S. made the WTO put a huge tax on it so Americans wouldn’t buy it. They’re punishing France for banning U.S. hormone-treated meat.” “Oh,” the demonstrators would generally say. “Wow. Thanks. I’ll give it a try.” Roquefort delighted and stunned some that day. But every tongue or nose that it touched was forever changed. It turned an ambiguous global food fight into something curious and concrete. Most who came into contact with Roquefort in Seattle were “cultured” by the cheese’s bacterial culture: they understood that the French farmers were fighting for something—for a food and a quality of life—they cared for deeply.

As we ran about offering bread and cheese to activists, Bové delivered another short speech, this time comparing his sabotage of McDonald’s and GMOS to the Boston Tea Party. He referred to the nonviolent direct action Americans took to free themselves from British imperialism centuries ago. Bové invoked the Boston Tea Party during the rest of that week. The reference served multiple functions. By referencing U.S. revolutionary history, Bové expressed solidarity with U.S. activists demonstrating against trade-related imperialism today. In addition, the Boston Tea Party served as a symbol of U.S. hypocrisy, casting Clinton into the ironic role of imperial power, this time punishing a Europe struggling to rid itself of U.S. tyranny.

Here we see the image of GMOS change dramatically. In the first phase of the GMO debate in France and elsewhere, the idea of GMOS was paired with figures of lab scientists manipulating pipettes. But GMOS were steadily undergoing a makeover and were now paired with notions of revolutionaries tossing boxes of tea and peasants sabotaging GMO greenhouses and McDonald’s construction sites. Photos and footage of the GMO debate displayed that day in Seattle traveled by satellite back to France and across the world,
further destabilizing the science frame that held primacy in the gmos controversy. Without a scientist in sight to be consulted about risk, Bové stood on the van’s rooftop holding up Roquefort for the world to see. He stood between U.S. and Indian farmers, symbolizing a new hybrid identity of cultural expert, family farmer, and international worker, speaking against neoliberalism and for the flourishing of local cultures and international solidarity. I remember standing on the ground, by the van, looking upward. When I traveled to France to conduct my research on the Confédération Paysanne, it never occurred to me that my research site would wind its way back to the United States. I never dreamed that a sheep’s milk producer such as Bové could become an international symbol of cultural expertise, identity, and resistance to global capital. I was astounded as I watched chunks of Roquefort cheese make their way into such a forum, meaning so much to so many.

In Seattle, Roquefort continued to serve as an ongoing symbol of French culture and resistance to U.S. imperialism. Papillon circulated through the streets and press conferences, toted around in duffel bags by Bové and the other farmers in its sparkling black and gold foil. Roquefort’s charisma moved activists to assist farmers in setting up tables and platters full of oven-baked bread and cheese. The ambiance of sharing inspired reporters to run out to local markets to buy wine as accompaniment. Riddled with blue pockets of bacterial culture, Roquefort was a visual and olfactory reminder of the stakes that had brought activists to confront globalization in both Millau and Seattle. Roquefort stood for culture against transnational capital.

Despite efforts of some U.S. media to portray Bové as an anti-American French nationalist, Bové consistently delivered a clear internationalist message. During his five-day stay in Seattle, Bové strategically appeared in press conferences with coalition family farmers. Cameras flashed as Bové and Christison stood side by side before a table of Christison’s Wisconsin cheddar and Bové’s Roquefort. Bové was also repeatedly photographed arm in arm with Indian and Mexican farmers from La Via Campesina at the main labor march. In media interviews, Bové stated repeatedly, “McDonald’s and gmo are not just American. They are bad food the wto obliges people everywhere to eat. Paysans, small farmers, can give you good food” (Bové, personal communication, November 19, 1999).
The Battle of Seattle

The evening after the McDo demonstration, we attended a large rally at a major Seattle stadium. After Michael Moore delivered a long and impassioned speech about corporate power, Bové strode onto the stage. Wearing jeans and a worn leather jacket, Bové walked slowly to the microphone and began speaking in a halting, careful voice as the audience struggled to both identify and understand him. Finally recognizing him from that day’s action, the crowd of nearly five thousand began to wail with excitement.

In the days following his arrival to the United States, Bové’s confidence in his English had grown considerably. In D.C. I served as translator for Bové and Dufour in nearly every interaction with press or members of other farmers’ organizations. Once in Seattle, however, Bové took the English gleaned during his childhood stint in California and transformed it into fodder for passionate oratory. While his beginners’ English infantilized him slightly, Bové competently conveyed a complex message through a limited vocabulary. Personally, I was accustomed to Bové’s rough brazen speech style and southern French accent. His powerful and articulate oratory style in French helped transform him into a hero in France. However, Bové’s newly refound ability to express himself in broken English allowed him to speak awkwardly — yet directly — to U.S. audiences. To his surprise, the Americans in the audience found his hesitant English endearing. Bové’s increasing ability to speak English stunned all in the delegation. At the Confédération Paysanne headquarters in Bagnolet I encountered only two actors who claimed to speak English “just a little.” Among the Confédération Paysanne delegation in Seattle, Bové was the only individual able to speak English with any degree of proficiency. The rest of the delegation admired him greatly for this, as they could utter only a few phrases, generally reserving these utterances for humorous imitations of American passersby.

Bové’s willingness to speak English publicly made him available to U.S. audiences in a way that few French activists had ever been. As Bové stood on the stage, calling for fair, rather than free, trade, he garnered tremendous respect. For many gathered there, it was the first time they had seen a French activist, a farmer at that, take center stage at an international protest forum. As Bové closed his speech, he asked all in the stadium to join the peaceful and nonviolent rally and march planned for the next day. These events were
to feature Bové and a dynamic lineup of international activists speaking out about the WTO.

The March, The Lockdown, The Aftermath

Since arriving in Seattle, members of the delegation had questioned me about events planned by the Direct Action Network. I explained that organizers were indeed planning a sit-in. According to Lehman, activists were to gather at four in the morning in front of, or near, the hotel where the trade meetings were to be held. Activists planned to form a great mass of people, assuming the form of a series of tight concentric circles. Fusing themselves together using chain or Kryptonite bicycle locks, they were to form a human blockade. This human obstruction was intended to prevent delegates from entering the building. “We can get up early and go to the lockdown. Afterward, we can attend the rally and march,” said one of the delegates. “We don’t have to get arrested,” she added. “It’s going to be the main event this week and José [Bové] should be there to at least witness it.”

With Bové moving about the city on his own, the rest of the delegation was unable to discuss the sit-in with him. No longer in need of a translator, Bové was busy attending numerous press conferences and meetings. My primary charge now was to assist the rest of the delegation from Millau that spoke no English. As translator and ethnographer, I was to attend the rally and march rather than participate in the civil disobedience taking place at the center of town. The next morning, the entire delegation wore “No to the WTO” yellow rain ponchos that were being inexpensively sold around town. That week in Seattle was cold and rainy, not uncommon for the last week of November. The group packed layers of sweaters under their ponchos and gathered proudly around the beautiful banner that had nearly been confiscated by the D.C. police. Surrounding the large logo at the banner’s center stood a mountain range and a large sun looming over the horizon. The delegates snapped pictures of each other in their ponchos, taking turns holding the banner before heading off to the stadium.

Minutes into the rally, we began hearing rumors that the civil disobedience had taken place as planned in the center of Seattle. We also heard that the police had responded with unexpected brutal force. Ignoring the rally (which took place in English), members of the Millau group posed questions about the sit-in: Were my friends okay? Had they been beaten and arrested? When the rally was over, we set off for the march. Each group preparing to
march waited in line, wearing matching T-shirts and carrying a banner. As I stood waiting with the delegation, I worried about the many activists I knew who had participated in the sit-in. At some point, Bové sauntered over to me. “Seems your friends have made quite a mess [bordel],” he smiled, conveying that he was indeed impressed. “Your police sound like monsters,” he added, walking back to his place next to Dufour.

For nearly two hours, I marched along with the delegation, which marched alongside the Karnataka farmers and a contingency of Mexican farmers from La Via Campesina who each carried bright banners. The march was lively and inspiring. Members of the United Steelworkers of America, anti-GMO activists, and indigenous groups from around the world strode in unison. I was surprised to see so many signs and banners that had explicitly anticapitalist, anti-free-trade messages, such as “Ban capitalism,” “Life isn’t a commodity,” and “Just say no to the WTO.” These slogans signaled a new analysis of global economic power that had not been seen in the United States for decades.

When the march finally tapered off, the Confédération Paysanne delegates decided to wander out into town on their own. Bové and Dufour quickly left to attend a meeting with representatives of international peasant and indigenous organizations. It became increasingly clear to the rest of the Millau group that Bové and Dufour were obliged to attend to an agenda largely designed by Public Citizen. With the march over, the Millau contingency would now create its own itinerary. The Millau group decided to venture into the center of Seattle to see what remained of the sit-in. We were stunned to face something reminiscent of a war scene we had only seen on film.

All stores were closed and almost all were boarded up. Streets were emptied of cars or casual pedestrians. Activists ran furtively from one crisis scene to another, usually clutching a T-shirt or another piece of fabric to their noses and mouths. It was clear that they were trying to mitigate the effects of chemical agents flung by police through the city air. On several street corners stood a few lay medics from the Direct Action Network. They were doing their best to assist people who had been doused with pepper spray, tear gas, or nerve gas. These individuals were usually down on the ground, grabbing at their eyes and coughing. The medics did their best to flush their eyes with a preparation of liquid antacid and water. While we had heard rumors of vast property damage done by activists, we saw very little evidence that much had been destroyed or broken. Only one storefront showed signs of sabo-
Chapter Nine

tage: a Starbucks window looked as if someone had hurled a brick through its center. Otherwise, the city’s infrastructure appeared protected and intact. What struck us instead were the contorted bodies walking around in a state of confusion. We saw people wrapping ripped T-shirts or bandanas around arms or wrists to stop bleeding. Several individuals were walking around, head in hands, eyes pressed shut from obvious pain.

We walked through the strangely vacant streets unable to make sense of what had happened, or what had gone wrong. At nearly every corner, police officers positioned themselves in rows of nearly twenty. They wore full riot gear and stood with arms folded and pressed against their chest. In the distance, we could see the remains of the sit-in that had taken place in the early morning. Large cardboard signs lay face down, sagging with moisture in the middle of the street. Strips of banners were strewn across sidewalks. Parts of large street-theater puppets lay eerily on the street, like dismembered bodies. A few gas masks were scattered along the ground, artifacts left behind by young activists who erroneously chose to wear them that day. As many reported later, police officers often ordered activists with gas masks to lift the apparatus, only to spray them straight in the face with tear gas—before replacing the mask. Hundreds of activists and ordinary pedestrians had been arrested and driven out of the city in school buses early that morning. Having been released due to obviously false charges, many had made their way back and were rambling through the streets, looking for friends who might have disappeared or been injured.

An old woman wearing long silver braids pinned to the top of her head wandered around holding the hand of her six-year-old granddaughter. She was looking for the rest of a group with whom she’d traveled from New Hampshire to Seattle. “We were sitting, linked arm in arm with our friends, singing peace songs, and they sprayed [tear gas] right into our faces,” she told us. “They could have blinded her,” the woman said, pointing to her granddaughter. Their eyes and faces were puffy and red. After each translation to members of the Millau group, they would respond by shaking their heads, muttering, “Pas possible [Impossible]” or “C’est grave, ça [That’s serious stuff].”

Other activists were wandering aimlessly, trying to find their way to the convergence center for medical care. From a few blocks away we could hear the sounds of other activists attempting to continue the fight, determined to maintain what they regarded as their right to remain in the streets. Some
could be seen speeding away from police squads, hiding around corners or abandoned vehicles. Others were down on their knees as officers beat them repeatedly with billy clubs before dragging them away. For hours, activists sat in school buses rented by the city police, waiting to be brought to jail. One young woman wandered over to us, crying hysterically, looking for her boyfriend. She seemed desperate to tell anyone her story: “They locked us in a bus for three hours. No water or bathroom. Then they drove us to the jail, where we sat for hours in a room where they turned the heat up so high we all felt sick. Then, they’d blast the air conditioning so we’d freeze. Hot then cold, hot then cold, like they wanted to torture us.” From time to time, a bold individual would pick off the ground a small canister containing chemical agents that had failed to detonate. Tossing the tiny canister back toward the police, the activist would cover his or her face and run the other way.

**RECAP: SEARCHING FOR AIR, AND A TRIP TO THE CONVERGENCE CENTER**

At some point the Millau group members determined they were exhausted and famished. We strode further downtown, where life was slightly less surreal. There were more people on the streets, although they too walked around appearing stupefied. We ducked into a pizza place, the only open restaurant on the block. Over a late lunch, we discussed fragments I had heard from passing activists or from old friends I had seen along the way in the city’s center. For almost an hour, I did my best to provide a recap of that morning’s events.

It seemed that at first the sit-in had gone well. Activists arrived at the scene at four in the morning, as planned. They sat in their prearranged places, forming concentric circles in front of the entrance to the hotel where the trade meetings were to take place. Others created the same formation at other street junctures, making it impossible for those attending the meeting that day to enter the area. Arms linked, protestors sang peace songs from the civil rights movement and played small hand drums or tiny wooden whistles. At first, the Seattle police force remained calm, standing by. For weeks they had been meeting with organizers from the Direct Action Network. The organizers had briefed the police on the practice of civil disobedience and explained that activists would be conducting a nonviolent sit-in. The officers had been amicable and assured organizers that they would maintain a clear line of communication before and during the protest.
Chapter Nine

At U.S. civil-disobedience actions such as sit-ins, there is generally a predictable police protocol. First, officers announce to protestors that by remaining in place (blocking an entryway or a passage), they are breaking the law. Protestors are instructed that they may avoid arrest by leaving the area calmly and immediately. This moment of prewarning in a sit-in is pivotal. Many activists plan to participate only in the initial stage of a sit-in in order to demonstrate their moral position related to a specific political issue. Doing so allows for a great number of people to symbolically have their say before the public, press, and political authorities. But not all activists are financially, physically, or psychologically able to subject themselves to the arrest process. Sometimes only a relatively small percentage of those participating in a sit-in have planned to go through the arrest process. Being arrested for engaging in an act of civil disobedience can require considerable time and money. First, activists must go through an arrest process that can last for an entire day. They can then be imprisoned for sentencing for hours or days. If the arrest and charges lead to a trial, this process can be lengthy, requiring frequent costly meetings with lawyers and time in a courtroom. While many poor activists in the United States choose to engage in this process for moral reasons, the consequences can prove onerous. They may lose their job, finances, and so on. And arrests can be physically harmful, depending on the arresting officer. An officer can tug at activists’ arms and shoulders, wrenching them behind their bodies. They can roughly drag activists into police cars or buses, jabbing them with billy clubs along the way. Many activists are injured during the arrest process, so older activists and those in ill health may choose not to go through it. Activists who depend on daily medication for mental or physical ailments may find themselves unable to access their prescriptions for days, putting themselves in a dangerous situation. In addition, depending on the state, city, and police force at hand, arrests can be dangerous for women and people of color, who are often more likely to be sexually or violently harassed by officers and prison guards. Queer people are often at tremendous risk of being abused when going through the arrest and prison process. Officers and prison guards are frequently physically rougher with visibly queer activists, and sometimes judges give them harsher sentences. These are just some of the many reasons that activists may choose to support civil disobedience by participating only in the initial stage.

Once those who have chosen to forgo arrest rise to their feet, police generally permit them to leave the scene unharmed. Officers then begin the pro-
cess of slowly arresting and removing demonstrators who chose to engage in civil disobedience. Brooke Lehman was a key organizer of the direct action that took place that week in Seattle. According to Lehman, on this day in Seattle, an unexpected sequence of events unfolded. The chief of police changed protocol by skipping the first step of officer engagement with the protestors: activists were never given warning to leave in order to avoid arrest (Brooke Lehman, personal communication, November 19, 1999). In the core of the sit-in were activists who planned to face arrest. They had created special equipment for committing a lockdown, a form of direct action where activists either lock their own bodies together in some way or lock themselves to a particular object such as a door handle, fence, tree (in the case of forest-protection activists), or even a motor vehicle. In this case, activists had created thick plastic tubes through which they placed their arms. Also strung through the tubing was a long steel chain that went from the cuff of one activist’s tube to the other. The activists were bound together.

A lockdown is often a preferred strategy for activists wanting to slow down the arrest and removal process. It can take sometimes over an hour for officers to safely use saws to detach each activist from the other without cutting anyone. At the sit-in in Seattle, only about thirty activists had chosen to engage in the lockdown. They formed a circle in the middle of the other circles formed by hundreds of other activists not planning to be arrested.

According to Lehman and others on the street that day, the police failed to provide activists with the official arrest warning. Police moved straight into the tightly seated crowd in absolute silence. They beat activists of all ages with billy clubs. They also deployed chemical agents. In some cases, they sprayed nerve or tear gas over the crowd’s heads, to shower a good number of people. In other cases, police sprayed chemicals directly into the faces of those seated. For the seated activists, this meant being temporarily blinded and enduring great pain and confusion (Lehman, November 19, 1999). They found themselves trapped in a dangerous situation. Many tried in vain to rise to their feet and run. But officers grabbed activists who were rising to leave or standing by as witnesses. Officers beat and sprayed them with chemical agents before hauling them away. Many people that day who never intended to commit civil disobedience found their hands bound behind their backs. At demonstrations, instead of using pricey and heavy metal handcuffs, police often use strong plastic strips not unlike those used to bind trash bags. While such devices are cheap, light, and disposable, they also often prove
injurious. Acting in a hurry, officers often bound activists’ hands too tightly behind their backs. The plastic strips can impair blood circulation in addition to cutting into wrists, bloodying people and causing great pain. As the young woman had reported to us that day, those who were arrested were then pushed into school buses and driven to jail. Arriving at the local prison, activists were reportedly abused, deprived of bathrooms and medical or legal services. For long hours they were also exposed alternately to extremely hot and cold temperatures.

As the crowd was in the thousands, the police officers were unable to arrest each and every person in the area. Many activists and Seattle residents who had been beaten or sprayed had decided to remain in front of the hotel. They wanted to talk to the press. They sought to protest the police brutality that they had either just experienced or witnessed. Hundreds fled, but hundreds remained in the area near the hotel for hours. All around the streets, we could hear people shouting, “The world is watching; the world is watching!” praying that the media present would capture the scene in its entirety.

I sat with the Millau group in the pizza restaurant, and we discussed our shared terror about the sit-in gone wrong. However, our momentary reprieve was interrupted by screams from a few individuals who were tearing fearfully down the street before the restaurant: “Run!” was all they shouted as they ran, covering their faces with any piece of cloth they could find. Within seconds, everyone seated in the restaurant was assaulted by what could only be described as a wall of sensory pain. Eyes streaming with tears, our throats roared with fire as our muscles twitched and ached. Most of us were instantly overtaken by waves of confusion, ache, and nausea. The restaurant owner snapped into action, ordering each customer onto the street. “We’ll be asphyxiated in here!” one member of the Millau group exclaimed as we stood wondering if we should listen to the restaurant owner or head for the street. And so we took to the small avenue before us, running blindly in no particular direction. Unfamiliar with the city, we looked at each other in panic. The Millau group looked at me, pleading, “What should we do?” Out of nowhere a cluster of frantic people ran by yelling, “Run to the water! There’s wind!” We indeed followed those running toward the water—having no idea how far away “the water” in Seattle might be. Finally, we reached a kind of boardwalk where a slight breeze wafted off the water. Fresh air poured over us as we began to calm. All around were the sights and sounds of people vomiting, coughing, and crying. Some of us began retching into the dirt. My eyes and
throat burned as if I’d inhaled fire. “What was that?” asked Fabien, a Millau farmer. “Tear gas, pepper spray, and nerve gas, I suppose,” I replied. Slowly we all stood, stunned. “The cops must have tossed canisters just up the street from the restaurant,” I mumbled, my throat and eyes raw. We decided to make our way down to the convergence center. Horrified by the situation, the Millau group wanted to learn more about the events of the day and why it had all gone so wrong. The convergence center occupied only a few floors of an abandoned warehouse. Looking around the raggedy and humble center, the Millau group expressed their immediate appreciation for the level of organization. “It’s really well orchestrated in here,” noted several in the group. “Can you imagine anyone in France being this organized?” several laughed. Along one main wall hung an enormous map of Seattle’s center. Organizers divided the map into various pie-shaped sections. Particular activist groups had been assigned to perform lockdowns or sit-ins in various parts of the city center that morning.

We made our way toward the center’s infirmary, as several of us needed painkillers for acute headaches and stomachaches that followed our exposure to chemical agents. Several people were lying on cots, moaning and vomiting intermittently. Volunteer medics attended to others, pouring solutions into activists’ burning eyes, dressing wounds, and swathing activists’ bodies or faces with sterile cloths. One young woman stood in the center of the infirmary, her face bathed in blood, her hair matted. “She needs a hospital,” a medic called as the young woman was given a compress and assisted down the stairs to await the car that was to take her to the hospital. “She’ll be lucky if she’s seen at all tonight,” another medic called back, indicating that the overpacked local ERs were unable to accommodate the number of injured individuals making their way to the hospitals. “Ambulances are hard to come by today,” shouted someone assisting another medic. As the young woman walked away, she kept repeating confusedly, “I swear, I was just sitting there, we were just sitting on the street, I swear, it was all nonviolent, I swear . . .”

In another wing of the convergence center, organizers were conducting an emergency meeting. They were using a meeting technique referred to as spokesmeeting, in which small groups of activists each select a spokesperson to sit in front of their group. Each spokesperson then constitutes one spoke in a wheel composed of other spokespersons. Many of the participants in the spokesmeeting were part of affinity groups. An affinity group is generally
a cluster of six to twelve activists who choose to enter a civil-disobedience event together. While some members may choose to be arrested, others volunteer to act as support on the ground, tracking their friends as they move through the legal system, doing all that they can to assist them in receiving legal and medical services. While some affinity groups are formed on the spot before a mass action, others are groups of people who came together to the action. These long-term affinity groups have been working together for between six months and twenty years.

During the spokesmeeting, decisions were made in a precise manner. When it came time to come to some kind of agreement, spokespersons turned back to their groups for consultation. After the group had come to a conclusion on a particular matter, the spokesperson would turn back again to the larger spokesgroup for further consultation, moving the process along. The spokesmeeting model is central to a commitment to democratic and decentralized organizing associated with many in the alter-globalization movement. Particularly in the United States, this model has become a popular and effective way to combine values of direct democracy with practical methods for decision making among relatively large groups of people. Most recently, the spokesmeeting model was a central form of group organization in the Occupy Wall Street movements that began in September 2011. “Amazing that so many people can work this efficiently together,” one member of the Millau group commented. The delegation watched people of all ages move through the convergence center. Some appeared mainstream; others were dressed in an antiauthoritarian style with black ragged clothing, body piercings, and dreaded or messy hair. Older activists, people from forty to seventy, helped lead groups and offer support in a variety of ways.

In another area of the convergence center stood a cluster of six or seven television sets, all tuned to different channels. While watching the sets, organizers communicated by cell phone to other organizers at the Independent Media Center located in another part of the city. Alter-globalization activists created the Independent Media Center as a way to produce their own media coverage of protests as they unfolded on the ground. U.S. activists had been long aware of the mass media’s tendency to minimize the size of protest groups while misrepresenting generally peaceful protestors as riotous and violent. To counter this trend, the Independent Media Center (now called Indymedia) invited technically inclined activists to take video and still prints
of events taking place on the streets, in addition to interviewing activists on the ground as protests developed. The Indymedia Center made its debut in Seattle. Since that time, activists have created centers all over the world. Indymedia centers constantly livestream video of alter-globalization events and provide edited print, audio, and video coverage. Media produced from such centers is relayed over the Internet to alternative and mainstream news outlets internationally.

Having observed the small media center at the convergence center, the Millau group asked to visit the Indymedia headquarters on the other side of town. As we entered the space, the Millau group was astonished to see how a group of young men and women had set up editing suites where they were hard at work to prepare short news stories to be sent out to the world. Translating for the Millau group, I communicated as best as I could information related to Indymedia staff by Indy reporters. As I translated reports on the activists’ stories that were coming into the center, the group stared at me, incredulous to hear about such degrees of police brutality. At the Indymedia center, as at the convergence center, multiple televisions were set up, all tuned to various U.S. news stations. By intermittently translating reports provided by mainstream media and Indymedia, the Millau group was able to note the dramatic disparity between information being sent out to the world. “C’est n’importe quoi, ici [What nonsense here],” said Francoise. “C’est pire qu’en France, meme! [It’s worse than in France even!”

BOVÉ AND THE MORNING AFTER

The next morning the delegation all met together for coffee in the hotel. Like everyone in the city (and the world), Bové had learned of the disaster that had taken place the morning before. He was impressed to learn that the Direct Action Network’s demonstration was well designed and nonviolent. While enraged by the viciousness of the police, he was impressed with the activists’ work. Bové said to me in his sly, subtle way the next morning: “You were right, they did good work. Your police are nasty, though.” That morning the Millau group attended a press conference organized by Public Citizen during which Bové would be interviewed. Into a series of microphones Bové declared with disgust, “This is no democracy, where peaceful protestors are beaten. It is shameful to see in the U.S.” At that press conference and at many afterward, Bové expressed solidarity with international activists
taking a bold stance against U.S. authorities. He denounced the U.S. govern-
ment for allowing the suppression to continue. His words traveled to France
and around the world, bringing global attention to a horrible affair.

During the days after the lockdown, people took to the streets. Many
were out-of-town activists who had been brutalized, terrified, jailed, and
released. A good many others were ordinary Seattle citizens who had had
little previous knowledge of the wto protest. They had decided to take time
off from work to join a collective effort to challenge their city’s police force.
These days were full of marching, singing, and chanting. By simply occupy-
ing the streets of Seattle, people defied police efforts to impose curfews, form
roadblocks, and threaten arrest. They were also challenging Clinton’s deci-
sion to send in the National Guard. According to many, the presence of the
National Guard only led to more terror and intense acts of violence directed
at U.S. citizens.

“What are they saying?” asked Pascale, after she and the Millau group
heard the same chant repeated over and over by protestors. “They’re chant-
ing, ‘Whose streets? Our streets! Whose streets? Our streets!’” I said, record-
ing the chants with my tape recorder. When marchers switched to another
now-familiar chant, I translated that one as well. “This is what democracy
looks like! This is what democracy looks like!” I shouted over the crowd’s
din. “They’re refusing the government’s demand that citizens stay off the
streets. They are saying that they see this demand as undemocratic.” That
particular chant, “This is what democracy looks like,” became the mantra for
that week in Seattle. “We’re all fighting for democracy,” Pascale added. She
smiled sadly at the crowd moving as one organism down the street.

Later that day throngs arrived before a small wooden platform con-
structed for a farmers’ rally scheduled to take place in downtown Seattle by
the lake. Crowds waited patiently for Bové to take the stage. People from all
over the United States, and from around the world, were moved by his un-
flinching conviction, his boldness, and his moustache-and-pipe charisma.
Perhaps because of his heavily accented and awkward English, many people
I interviewed found Bové “charming,” “sexy,” and “so French.” They re-
ported being surprised to see that “French people” were concerned with
questions of fair trade or democracy. When I asked about this surprise, many
answered, “It’s usually people from the Third World, poor people, who are
being done in by the wto.”

In all of his interviews and orations during those days in Seattle, Bové
Operation Roquefort, Part II

artfully linked a series of issues. He made connections between the right of U.S. citizens to peaceful protest with the right of people around the world to determine their own economies and cultures. As Bové articulated that day, the WTO was a threat not just to fair trade but to democracy in general. The WTO was described by many as a “mafia-like” alliance among state bodies, multinational corporations, and supranational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Many described this mafia as determined to control the ways of life of the world’s population.

Standing among the crowd listening to Bové, I wandered around, interviewing activists, holding out my little tape recorder. Seeing my tiny contraption, people seemed relieved to have somewhere to place their thoughts. “Who knows?” I said, “I might write a book about this someday,” I said, trying to reassure them. Many U.S. citizens during those days in Seattle spoke their thoughts into my tape recorder, expressing how inspiring and reassuring it was to see international activists present to speak out against the assault on democracy that they had seen in Seattle. While some interviewees saw Bové as allied with peasants and indigenous peoples in the Global South, many others saw him as representing French citizens, as a witness from a global superpower who would travel back to his country and spread the news about what had happened in an allegedly democratic U.S. city: “Let him tell France, tell the rest of the world, what democracy really looks like in the U.S.” This was a refrain repeated often into my recorder by members of the French delegation as well as by U.S. activists. But the words were not just directed to the problem of nondemocracy in the United States. According to nearly everyone I encountered, the crisis witnessed in Seattle was perceived as clearly international in character. For so many, the WTO had come to symbolize a malevolent form of neoliberalism; they saw it as a form of nondemocracy that was slowly encompassing the globe.

After spending three days in Seattle, the French delegation traveled as planned back to France. Released from my charge as a translator, I remained in the city for several more days. I joined activists’ ongoing fight to challenge police brutality, to free the many activists still incarcerated in the city’s King County jail, and to convince the WTO to cancel its meeting. After many days of street marches and demonstrations, activists felt a sense of tremendous triumph when some of these goals were achieved.

During a chilly evening meeting outside the city’s main prison, hundreds of activists met in spokesgroups to draw up a set of demands. In particular,
Chapter Nine

the groups sought the release of all activist prisoners, rejecting police accusations that some of the arrested merited harsher sentences than others. As many of the imprisoned were engaging in “jail solidarity,” they had refused to provide police and prison officials with their names. In turn, they declined to admit that they had committed any punishable crime that would distinguish them from any other prisoner. Those on the outside also engaged in jail solidarity by conducting a sit-in in front of the prison and chanting their support for hours on end. Toward the end of the evening, at nearly eleven o’clock, the Direct Action Network’s legal council announced to the crowd that all prisoners would be released immanently.

That same memorable night, after the good news at the prison, I made my way over to the Westin Hotel, where a late-night meeting was being held by representatives of the wto. A group of about twenty activists were engaged in a lockdown. They had attached themselves to the hotel’s entrance with bicycle locks, attempting to obstruct the entrance as best as they could. Around the front of the hotel were young people drumming and dancing, singing political chants they hoped the trade officials might hear. At issue were rumors circulating about African wto delegates. Many who had witnessed the trade meetings had told me that delegates from several African nations were being pressured to sign on to particular free-trade agreements they knew would prove disastrous to the peoples of their countries. In unison, activists engaged in lockdown alongside about a hundred others who were drumming, dancing, and chanting, “Africa, don’t sign! Africa, don’t sign!” After sitting and talking with the activists, I heard screams of joy. “Africa bailed!” a young woman yelled as she ran from the hotel entryway toward the small group. “The delegates from several African nations have refused to sign and so the meetings are done.” Deafening cheers rang out as young people pounded on their drums. “That means the meetings are canceled!” called out a young man near the hotel’s entrance. “The delegates heard us. We made the wto cancel their meetings!” No one will ever know if those outside the hotel indeed informed the African delegates’ decision to refuse to sign the trade agreements. Yet both mainstream media and Indy-media agreed that the refusal led to a stalemate, which in turn led to the meeting’s cancellation.

For many in Seattle that week, it seemed likely that activists’ efforts were effective. They challenged perceived injustices associated with the wto. In addition, they articulated resistance to acts committed by the city and na-
tional officials they regarded as violent and undemocratic. Perhaps most impor-
tant to so many, they communicated support for those within the WTO who opposed the trade body while also publicly contesting the legitimacy of the institution itself.

Conclusion

The visit to the United States provided a window into the key differences between French and U.S. cultures of food, politics, and activism. This text cannot possibly provide an in-depth exploration of all these cultural differences. But it is still useful to examine how such disparities in group cultures surfaced during the Confédération Paysanne’s voyage to the United States. In addition, the trip provided the union insights into the heterogeneous and democratic character of an increasingly international movement. A growing awareness of both cultural difference and international solidarity perhaps helped the Confédération Paysanne as it turned next to furthering its own struggle in France. According to Bové, the delegation was moved by the democratic and antiauthoritarian sensibility expressed by the Direct Action Network and other U.S. activists in Seattle. For Bové, what came to be called the Battle of Seattle reminded him of the spirit of the Larzac and the events of May 1968. All three actions opened a cultural space in which heterogeneous sets of actors and objectives could merge in creative new ways. As the delegation departed the United States for France, many members expressed a desire to incorporate this Seattle sensibility into union events that would ensue in France during the coming months.