Central to the postindustrial condition is the rise of new oppositional actors resisting a brand of instrumentalism associated with neoliberalism. The instant popularity of Bové’s book *The World Is Not for Sale* (Bové and Dufour 2001) spoke to a growing collective malaise in France (and throughout much of the Global North) regarding a perceived reduction of life, nature, food, and humanity to commodities. In an era of increasing deregulation and free trade, actors began to form groups and coalitions, positioning local cultures and natures against multinational corporations and the political bodies working to support global capital. Out of the ashes of a once diverse and richly populated agricultural landscape rose a social movement given new momentum by an international alter-globalization movement that expressed an antineoliberal sentiment around the world. From 2000 to 2003 Bové enjoyed tremendous popularity in France, providing the Confédération Paysanne a much-needed leg up in French agricultural policymaking forums. Following 2004, however, Bové’s popularity declined slightly. In a political and economic climate
of increasing neoliberalism, Bové and the Confédération Paysanne found themselves striving to popularize their postindustrial model of agriculture and society.

Confédération Paysanne: Enjoying the National Spotlight

Union Success and a Commando-style Arrest

The year 2000 saw the close of Dufour’s eventful term as union speaker. When Dufour’s run ended, Bové was instated as the new speaker at the union’s annual general assembly. After the events of 1999, Bové seemed a natural choice. The Confédération Paysanne is a leaderless body, but the media nevertheless regarded Bové as the leader, and his excellent communication skills and national popularity made him a powerful voice for articulating the union’s goals and objectives. During his tenure as union speaker (2000–2003), Bové continued to build on the momentum of the alter-globalization movement, continually expanding the Confédération Paysanne’s vision to include an increasingly global, solidaire, and antineoliberal perspective. As Bové’s alter-globalization activities are too numerous to name here, I focus on a few events surrounding Bové and the union that struck me as particularly pertinent.

Seattle-sur-Tarn

In June of 2000, Bové co-organized an alter-globalization rally in Larzac featuring a crowd of two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand. The event was referred to as Seattle-sur-Tarn (Tarn Valley is in southern France). The reference to Seattle is significant. The Battle of Seattle had set the tone and sensibility for an alter-globalization movement that was emerging in France as well as throughout Europe and the world. Seattle-sur-Tarn took place during the days leading up to Bové’s trial for the McDo affair of 1999. As usual, Bové playfully referred to his trial as “the trial of free trade” and the “Millau Trade Round” (Lichfield 2000). In the weeks leading up to the Tarn rally, Bové promised the festival would be a political, festive, and peaceful demonstration. The planning committee booked three popular French rock bands and constructed an open-air auditorium for an anti-free-trade rally and conference. During the weeks before the event, national and international press such as London’s the Independent began referring to the festival as an “Alter-globalization Woodstock,” linguistically linking it to the bur-
geoning new social movements of the U.S. Left that were associated with the 1960s (June 26, 2000).

Even weeks before the event, French media coverage was often quite negative. Because Millau was the site of both Bové’s trial and the festival, journalists portrayed the town’s citizens as inevitable victims of anticipated vandalism. The media repeatedly invoked the events in Seattle, predicting a similar scenario to take place in Millau. As in the United States, the French mainstream media framed Seattle protestors in a negative light. Instead of declaring U.S. armed forces guilty of turning against unarmed and vulnerable citizens, the media depicted the protestors as out of control. It was common knowledge that Seattle authorities had removed the city’s mayor, determining that he had been guilty of overreacting. Yet the idea of violent protesters remains fixed in national and international consciousness to this day.

Britain’s popular newspaper the *Independent* described the anticipated Seattle-sur-Tarn in the following way:

After Seattle and Davos, the small town of Millau in the south of France fears this week that it may become the latest casualty of violent protests against the globalisation of trade. Something like 30,000 people from the various tribes of the “new left”—small farmers, ecologists, anarchists, anti-capitalists—will descend on the town on Friday to picket the trial of Jose Bove, a farmer who has become one of the living saints of the anti-globalisers. Mr Bove, a sheep farmer, producer of Roquefort cheese and veteran political activist, faces a possible jail sentence for his part in the demolition of a half-built McDonald’s restaurant last summer. . . . Eight hundred policemen will be mobilised. Schools will be closed. The courthouse will be cordoned off. The McDonald’s restaurant in the town will be shut and boarded up. CNN has rented rooms in flats overlooking the courthouse, in the expectation of tele-visual violence. . . . Thanks to his charisma, eloquence and trademark droopy moustache and pipe, Mr Bove has become one of the rallying points of the struggle against *malbouffé* [junk food] in France and in the wider international campaign against rules enforcing global trade. (Lichfield 2000)

Portrayals of Bové and the antiglobalization movement both reflected and shaped popular attitudes toward the emerging crusade in France and abroad. Both the Associated Press and Agence France-Presse tended to portray Bové as the “droopy mustached” or “living saint” of “tribes” of violent “anti-globalizers” (Agence Press, June 27, 2000; Associated Press, June 28, 2000).
Such descriptors sought to trivialize and depoliticize Bové and the movements that he helped foster. The media acted as a disciplining force, attempting to reduce Bové and other activists to powerless, humorous caricatures. At this time the BBC described Bové as “a peasant Robin Hood” (Pearce 2000), invoking the comparison between Bové and the French comic strip hero Asterix. The media often commented on the likeness between Bové and Asterix, the feisty Gaul who leads a ludicrous battle against the Roman Empire during ancient times. The Asterix reference was often hypocritical, reflecting the nation’s ambivalence about Bové. While narratives presented Bové as a ridiculous buffoon, they also extolled him as an exemplary little guy fighting the big guy. These complex and contradictory representations played a role in establishing Bové as a symbol of “French individuality [by] refusing to be swamped by imperial forces” (Pearce 2003). Such portrayals increased Bové’s popularity, but they often presented him and the union in nationalistic terms. One conversation I had with a union paysan in July 2000 summed up the union’s take on the Asterix problem: “We can’t win. Either we’re stupid country bumpkins [ploucs] fighting a ridiculous battle, or we’re reactionary nationalists that the Right adores” (personal communication, July 8, 2000).

Despite media’s portrayal of Bové and the event, Seattle-sur-Tarn proved to be a nonviolent event. According to the Confédération Paysanne member Robert G., Bové’s media-rich presence in Seattle had emboldened many in France who had been disenchanted by politics as usual. In particular, it spoke to those who perceived France’s national party system as incapable of adequately addressing social and ecological problems associated with neoliberalism and privatization. In 2000, it seemed a new generation was coming of age in France, a generation whose collective motto (inspired by the Zapatistas) was “Another world is possible.” At Seattle-sur-Tarn, this slogan appeared on banners, T-shirts, and buttons. “Un autre monde est possible” was written in body paint across the bare backs of many young men who had traveled to Millau that day. The Zapatista phrase captured the utopian sensibility that marked this new movement. Rejecting a logic of instrumentalism that reduced peoples, lands, and water to commodities and profit margins, French youths at Seattle-sur-Tarn identified with an alternate vision. They sought a world built out of a logic of solidarity.

At the festival, activists young and old, farmer and nonfarmer, strolled through the open-air market. Each farm stand provided farm products (pro-
duits fermiers), foods rich in symbolic capital. Filling conference tents, attendees listened to paysans lecture on the union’s vision of Paysan Agriculture. Every once in a while, Bové and other members of the Confédération Paysanne rode through the throngs on a hay wagon. They waved and smiled while the crowd cheered them on. According to several actors I talked to following the festival, Seattle-sur-Tarn was peaceful, jovial, and brought forth fond memories of the Larzac movement. Like the Larzac, Seattle-sur-Tarn brought together a broad spectrum of actors, farmers, and nonfarmers to fight for a shared cause.

From the stage, Bové addressed festival participants, reminding them of the struggles that still lay ahead. In numerous speeches, Bové tried to keep the momentum going against the WTO. He discussed the upcoming WTO meeting in Cancún, Mexico. Bové explained that organizers for the trade body vowed to never again hold its meetings in a major city such as Seattle that could be readily accessible to protestors. “Cancún, Mexico, is the site for the next meeting,” Bové shouted into his microphone. “If we can’t be there physically, we will protest all over the world symbolically. We must mobilize to make sure that the Cancún summit is a failure. We must put the 146 member governments under citizen’s arrest so that they can’t sign an agreement in Cancún!” (Agence France-Presse 2000).

In the next few years following Seattle-sur-Tarn, Bové and the Confédération Paysanne enjoyed tremendous popular support in the French agricultural world. By 2003, this support led the union to win 28 percent of the seats in the chamber of agriculture. This feat signaled that nearly one-third of all French farmers at the time shared the union’s concerns and goals; the industrial model of agriculture appeared to be politically challenged on a significant level in France. With the general support of the French populace, the government had difficulties disciplining Bové for his previous anti-GMO activities. Upon returning to France after his U.S. voyage, Bové was tried in 2000 for the 1999 McDo action. As in his trial in Nérac, Bové sent a clear message to the media: he reversed the charges by asserting that fast food, GMOs, and free trade would be symbolically tried in court rather than Bové himself. Once again, Bové transformed the trial into a forum to communicate an alter-globalization message. At the trial’s end, he received a disappointing fourteen-month sentence. Yet, as usual, Bové made good use of the period leading up to his incarceration. In press interviews he publicly
contested the political validity of both the charges and the punishment. He framed his acts as an attempt to defend the public good from corporate harm.

In September 2002, Bové was still engaged in the protracted process of actively appealing his fourteen-month sentence. But that sentence was not all that troubled him that year. At the same time, he awaited a judge’s decision on another sentencing for a crop pull that took place in 2000. In this action, Bové and four hundred others destroyed a field of genetically modified canola in the southwestern town of Gaudies. For this action, Bové faced up to five years in prison and a maximum fine of nearly US$15,000 for damages. It is not uncommon for rigorous and public activists to face multiple sets of charges, appeals, and sentences at a given time. Always drawing from cultural symbolism and metaphor, Bové and eight others wore “girls’ frocks” to their trial in Foix. The frocks were a cultural reference to a local conflict in the Middle Ages between peasants and tax collectors. In the Middle Ages, male peasants would protest state hunting laws that forbade them from entering the forest. By disguising themselves in white girls’ frocks, they fooled state gamekeepers. They could enter the forest to hunt without being heavily taxed. The frocked peasants were known as the demoiselles (maidens). “Our battle against GMOs has much in common with that of the demoiselles,” said Bové to a reporter. “We too are running against a French justice system opposed to common protest action and deaf to the concerns of citizens” (Agence France-Presse 2002).

In 2003, Bové received ample coverage of his impending, yet long-awaited, sentence for the McDo affair. In France, as in many countries, the pace and process of sentencing and imprisoning high-profile citizens can be politically charged as legal authorities consider the implications of sentencing practices for public opinion. In the case of Bové, many in the union explained that he was fortunate to have popular support on his side. As national secretary Jean-Pierre Testard said to me, “They take their time with Bové. They hope to wait until the public loses interest in him to put him in prison. They saw what happened when he was imprisoned the first time! What a mess that was for the government!” (personal communication, August 21, 2005).

But by June 2003, French legal authorities had grown weary of waiting and instead took abrupt unexpected action. The government orchestrated a highly dramatic sequence in which they ordered one hundred police officers to surround Bové’s home in rural Millau. When Bové opened his front door,
he was immediately taken into the state’s custody and flown by helicopter to prison. Several weeks later, Bové was interviewed by France’s national television show *Les 4 vérités* (The four truths). In this exchange, Bové reflected on the government’s decision to transform his delivery to prison into sensationalist news. According to Bové, at the time of his arrest, he was merely living and working on his sheep farm near Millau. He was neither hiding his whereabouts nor presenting a threat to police. For Bové, the government’s helicopter-and-police strategy was an attempt to portray him as a dangerous and fleeing criminal. “Surrounding my home with one hundred police and dragging me into a helicopter in handcuffs was clearly a political act,” Bové said with contained disgust during the interview. In an interview I conducted with him, he noted, “After waiting years to take me off to jail, they thought they might as well make it a grand gesture, to justify the wait” (personal communication, September 2, 2003).

French and European media generally sided with Bové decrying the airlift as overkill. French print and television media intently focused on this event, often describing it as a “commando-style” operation. Britain’s BBC ran a story on June 23 titled “French Anger at Bové ‘Commando’ Arrest” (BBC News 2003). Describing the event as a “strong-arm tactic,” the reporter wrote, “Bové was snatched from his farm in southern France in a dawn commando-style operation that involved scores of police officers.”

In addition to garnering the support of the media, Bové had many allies among the French Left. Leaders of the Green, Socialist, and Communist Parties spoke in Bové’s defense at the harsh treatment of a union man. Julien Dray, leader of the Socialist Party, showed his support, saying on Canal 2, France’s major network news program, “The government has chosen confrontation” (June 24, 2003). Leaders of various trade unions spoke out as well. Marc Blondel of the union Force Ouvrier (Workers’ Power) said, “It was particularly shocking that a union official should be taken to prison like a dangerous outlaw” (BBC News 2003). In the Left’s reaction we can see once again how Bové presented himself to the world and how the world received him. For years Bové’s image had transcended the identity of “union man” defending workers’ rights. He had become a postindustrial hybrid entity: part worker, part alter-globalization activist, part ecologist, and part Gandhian international humanist. Yet despite his stretching of the definition and role of a traditional French union man, his identity and message still resonated with those on the Left willing to regard him as one of their own.
France’s right wing, however, saw the arrest differently. President Chirac’s party supported the arrest, stating, “José Bové went into battle and he knew the risks” (my translation). By comparing Bové’s symbolic attacks on a McDonald’s to a warrior going to battle, Chirac’s party exaggerated the dimensions of Bové’s actions to justify the government’s sensationalist and militaristic arrest tactics. At this time, Nicolas Sarkozy was France’s interior minister. Sarkozy also defended the police tactics. According to Sarkozy, “Because it is Bové, who speaks perfect English and who the media adore, must the government refuse to apply a juridical decision? What’s the problem? Where’s the scandal?” (BBC News 2003; my translation). Aware that the French public was not pleased with the harsh arrest tactics, Sarkozy delivered a statement to normalize the government’s actions. Instead of directly trivializing the public’s reaction, Sarkozy minimized the significance of the tactics. For Sarkozy, the arrest tactics were not even fit for discussion. They were not scandalous, problematic, or unusual in any way. Sarkozy’s mention of Bové’s “perfect English” in several news interviews reflects his attempt to undermine Bové’s cultural appeal. The social capital embedded in Bové’s English-speaking abilities is palpable in Sarkozy’s statement. Sarkozy attempts to invalidate Bové by revealing him as a fraudulent folk hero. For Sarkozy, there exists an unbridgeable chasm between being an English-speaking and sophisticated political operator, and being a paysan. According to Sarkozy’s depiction, Bové shared little in common with his non-English-speaking French supporters. During this time, many actors in powerful institutions attempted to destabilize Bové’s public acceptance by destroying his folksy image. Despite the government’s attempts to defile his identity as a paysan, Bové triumphed again. He received considerable coverage the day Chirac publicly agreed to reduce his sentence from fourteen months to four. One month later, on Bastille Day, Bové reaped even more attention when Chirac paroled Bové’s sentence entirely. These events were largely due to political pressure from the French Left.

Outside France, Bové garnered significant media focus from 2000 to 2002 for spearheading numerous anti-GMO actions internationally. Bové began traveling to India, Brazil, Palestine, Mexico, Canada, and other countries to participate in crop pulls and rallies; he also often committed acts of civil disobedience. In each interview, Bové continued to link the problem of GMOs to questions of neoliberal trade, privatization, life patents, and the world’s farmers’ right of access to land, water, and indigenous seeds.
In 2001, Bové participated in a counterconference to be held simultaneously in Qatar, where the next cycle of WTO meetings took place. This cycle of WTO meetings was part of what was called the Doha Round, begun in Doha, Qatar, in the Persian Gulf in 2001. WTO leaders chose Doha as the site for the first ministerial-level meeting of the Doha Development Round for a specific reason. At the Battle of Seattle two years earlier in 1999, activists had proven capable of tarnishing the WTO’s reputation and canceling its meetings. In a post-Seattle era, WTO organizers would never hold a key meeting in an accessible international city such as Seattle. From now on, the WTO would take great care to hold its meetings in locations outside the United States that would prove hard to reach for activists. Doha was financially and politically inaccessible to most protestors. Qatar is only bordered by one country—Saudi Arabia. The rest of Qatar is surrounded by water, the Persian Gulf. Accessing visas to enter Qatar proved impossible for thousands who would have otherwise attended the countersummit. The round that began in Doha continued in Cancún, another location that prevented on-the-ground preplanning for organizations such as the Direct Action Network. Even so government actors put in place security and surveillance measures weeks before the meetings, creating militaristic zones around the trade meetings. Thousands of Mexican and international activists either were officially prohibited from attending the meetings or found themselves banned from crossing the border to Mexico. Despite the extensive efforts taken by the WTO to make its meetings unreachable to protestors, activist groups did make their way to Cancún to protest the WTO by the thousands. Although there lacked sufficient space in Cancún for protestors to plan a “Battle of Cancún,” their presence there flagged the continuity of an alter-globalization activism still percolating internationally.

**The World Social Forum: Alter-Globalization Bové**

In 2001, building on the momentum of the growing alter-globalization movement, an informal alliance of groups from around the world came together to create an annual countersummit to the World Economic Forum held each January in Davos, Switzerland. Bové was a key speaker at the first gathering in Porte Alegre, Brazil. To express solidarity with rural peoples oppressed by a global neoliberal system, he shared a panel with members of the Brazilian movement of landless farmworkers. Like the Peoples’ Global Action, this movement was inspired greatly by the encuentros created by
the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. There is a clear theme that runs through the Zapatista’s encuentros, Peoples’ Global Action, and the World Social Forum. Each gathering represents an attempt to provide a space where groups can articulate problems and solutions related to life in an increasingly neoliberal world.

These gatherings also share a commitment to creating an alternative to a traditional Left marked by hierarchical and labor-centric parties. Like the Encuentros and Peoples’ Global Action, the World Social Forum was born out of a call for a “new internationalism” emerging in a post-Marxist world (de Sousa Santos 2006, 38). The People’s Global Action and the World Social Forum emerged during a distinct historical juncture. The worker was no longer the vanguard revolutionary subject, just as the industrial factory was no longer the primary site for revolutionary activity. Instead, actors like paysans, the landless, indigenous peoples, and women’s groups started to fight for the disenfranchised edged out of the industrial project. These actors seek a world based on a different logic than the one that brought industrial capitalism into place (Escobar et al. 2004).

As the World Social Forum has developed over the years, it has come to be called by many “the movement of movements.” Boaventura de Sousa Santos provides insight into what makes the World Social Forum special. It proposes no single political or economic model such as communism, socialism, anarchism, or social democracy. Yet actors who identify with the World Social Forum’s aims tend to identify with an antineoliberal stance, as well as a (loosely defined) commitment to nonviolent direct action. For de Sousa Santos, the World Social Forum is a “critical utopia” in that it explores what is possible, albeit in a critical way (de Sousa Santos 2006, 3).

In so doing, those who created the World Social Forum rejected taken-for-granted Western models of what a utopian society would be. The World Social Forum confronts the “sociology of absences” by creating a space in which individuals rendered absent from powerful institutions (in other words, disenfranchised by a neoliberal global economy) can have their concrete presence recognized (de Sousa Santos 2003, 4). It provides a space where the “sociology of emergences” can be explored by those alter-globalization activists seeking alternatives to the dominant order. According to de Sousa Santos: “The sociology of emergences . . . consists in undertaking a symbolic enlargement of knowledge, practices, and agents in order to identify therein the tendencies of the future (the Not Yet) upon which it is possible to inter-
vene so as to maximize the probability of hope vis-à-vis the probability of frustration” (2003, 2).

Since 2001, the World Social Forum has been held annually in such countries as Brazil, India, and Pakistan. Each forum brings together between 60,000 and 160,000 activists from more than 130 countries. In addition to these large gatherings, the organizers have created an array of regional and national social forums, including the European Social Forum, the Asian Social Forum, the U.S. Social Forum, and the Mediterranean Social Forum. The objective of both national and international World Social Forums is to give voice to “Southern epistemologies” (de Sousa Santos 2006, 19). Such epistemologies—or ways of knowing—represent new economic, cultural, and political visions that resonate with actors such as those in the Confédération Paysanne. Many groups who participate in the forum are geographically isolated and politically disenfranchised. In this way, the World Social Forum enables actors to become aware of common problems and objectives. During the five-day event, the forum offers hundreds of workshops, lectures, plenaries, and panels that address issues of landlessness, indigeneity, sex and gender liberation, and economic and political alternatives.

In addition to providing educational and networking opportunities, the World Social Forum offers groups an occasion to demonstrate together around particular issues. At the first gathering in Porte Alegre, Bové co-led a march of thirteen hundred Brazilian farmers working on a plantation owned by Monsanto. At the plantation, the group conducted a crop pull of genetically modified corn and soy. Using a gesture perhaps borrowed from the Karnataka farmers, the Brazilian workers burned genetically modified seeds found in storerooms and destroyed documents in the company’s offices. In a pamphlet called “Report on the First World Social Forum, Porto Alegre Brazil,” the U.S. Green Party activist Carol Brouillet described the event as “Bové and the others taking possession of the Monsanto plantation, planting their own crops, pledging to turn the farm into a model of sustainable agriculture” (2001). During the demonstration, activists held placards featuring phrases such as “Another world is possible” and “People are not commodities.” These slogans crystallize a set of meanings communicated by actors who are refusing an instrumentalizing system that is seen as caring little for the world’s poor and the environment. Following the demonstration, Bové was arrested and threatened with deportation. In response, activists gathered outside the prison where he was briefly detained. His detainment was met
with strong outrage by those in Brazil and internationally, making headlines in major newspapers. Surprised by the turmoil that ensued following his arrest, the Brazilian government dropped all charges against him. At the final closing of that first World Social Forum, many in the crowd held banners proclaiming, “We are all Bové!” Actors such as de Sousa Santos, Bové, and many Confédération Paysanne members seek to explore knowledge, practices, and agents excluded from determining what is indeed possible in the future. Bové has participated in nearly every World Social Forum, including regional gatherings.

At the fourth World Social Forum in Mumbai, India, in 2004, Bové was once again a significant voice, delivering the inaugural speech to a crowd of a hundred thousand activists and decrying neoliberalism and promoting a logic of solidarity. Standing beside the Nobel laureates Shirin Ebadi and Joseph Stiglitz, Bové challenged the monopoly multinationals have over water and agriculture. According to Al Jazeera, on January 17, 2005, Bové chanted to the crowd, “Nestle, Coca-Cola, leave our countries, give us our rights!” He continued, “The WTO has to get out of agriculture. Its policies are threatening our future.” In the online publication Countercurrents, Krishna Kumar reported Bové to have coined the slogan “Globalize your struggles to globalize your hopes” (Brouillet 2001).

**POSTINDUSTRIAL PRIVATIZATION: WATER WARS**

In February 2004, Bové extended his focus to include the privatization question. After the World Social Forum in Mumbai, he was invited to inaugurate the World Water Conference in Kerala, India, in the region of Plachimada. Bové spoke in support of struggles against what he called water hijackers, including the Coca-Cola Company, for exploiting natural resources throughout the world (Kumar 2004). The privatization of services such as water is endemic in the postindustrial condition. As powers in the Global North exhaust the limits of industrial production, corporations search for ever-broader extraindustrial sites for capital accumulation. At such a juncture, the question of water becomes a contentious issue. Water was once considered by analysts on the Left as an externality lying outside, yet necessary to, the capitalist system. Under postindustrial capitalism, however, water became a new and powerful commodity (Shiva 2002). In other words, whereas water was once culturally understood as a public resource, it is now recast as a private service. Corporations and states are buying and sell-
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ing reservoirs, rivers, groundwater, and even segments of ocean as monies change hands between rich and poor countries.

For Bové and the union, water privatization is a further instance of the commercialization (marchandizement) of life itself. For decades, private firms such as Coca-Cola, Vivandi, and PepsiCo have used satellite technologies to identify reservoirs and groundwater in countries such as India and Mexico (Shiva 2002). After purchasing water rights from leaders of poor countries, they render waters inaccessible to farmers and citizens for irrigation, drinking, and other subsistence uses. As local wells (and subsistence fields) dry up, local peoples are obliged to walk greater distances daily to reach sources. Privatized water is often shipped to processing plants where it is bottled and transported throughout the Global North, where middle-class consumers increasingly prefer bottled to tap. In many countries, the price of a bottle of water is significantly more expensive than a bottle of Coca-Cola or other sodas. Other sources of water in poor rural areas are sold to private firms, which subsequently divert waterways such as rivers and lakes to provide services in megacities for privileged consumers who can afford to pay for potable running water (NACLA News 2007).

At the Kerala World Water Conference in Plachimada, Bové inaugurated an event directly across from the Coca-Cola processing plant. Local conference organizers used loudspeakers so that each word of the conference would be audible to plant workers and officials (Barlow 2004). Addressing a crowd of five thousand people (largely headed up by women’s associations), Bové said in his opening speech: “The struggle of Plachimada is part of the worldwide struggle against transnational companies that exploit natural resources like water. The companies have made water a priced commodity to make profit. We will take this issue across the globe as the finest example of the over-exploitation of water resources driven by Coca-Cola and Pepsi. . . . Yours is a just struggle and you have the support of France and farmers and those in other alter-globalization movements in different parts of the world” (quoted in Kumar 2004). As we have seen before, Bové functions as a hybrid entity empowered to speak to, and on the behalf of, a range of subaltern actors. As a citizen of an EU country, he has significant cultural and material privilege. Yet as a paysan, standing in solidarity with peasants in the Global South, he shares a common refusal of the instrumental logic embedded in neoliberal privatization. His promise of moral support also has material implications. For example, resource sharing, such as the transportation costs of
European actors, to attend protests (to enhance media appeal), bolsters the voice of actors whose causes are otherwise unheard in the Global South.

Bové’s presence in international social movements—or movements that extend beyond national borders—is worthy of analysis (see Smith, Chatfield, and Pagunco 1997; Tarrow 1998). As a member of La Via Campesina, among other international organizations, Bové plays a key role in helping to globalize struggles related to water, land, agriculture, and indigenous rights and identity. As de Sousa Santos suggests (2003, 12), international activists can never replace on-the-ground efforts marked by rich local constituencies. Bové’s presence at such forums, however, can provide a stabilizing force, supporting local groups and organizations. And as Sonia Alvarez suggests, internationalist identity solidarity can be “salutary for local movements,” enhancing the public visibility of claims made by movements in the host country, providing activists with a shared though continually resignified political language, discursive frameworks, and organizational practices (Alvarez 2000, 9). Sometimes, such internationalist actions yield impressive results. In response to the water conference, the Kerala government took action on February 18, 2004, by ordering the Coca-Cola Company to close for four months. Acknowledging the corporation’s deleterious effects on the local water system, the Kerala government publicly called for a thorough investigation of damages caused.

The water- privatization question was not new for Bové. As early as the fall of 1999 Bové and the Confédération Paysanne led an anti-Vivandi action in Paris. I was present at this demonstration, so I can confirm that it embodied the union’s distinct style of direct action. After more than two hundred protestors rushed the stairwells of the Vivandi headquarters, they set about the daylong occupation by creating a festive atmosphere. Armed with boxes of bread, cheese, wine, and pâté, paysans and supporters spent the day laughing and picnicking along the wall-to-wall gray carpets that lined Vivandi’s expansive offices. During this action, protestors watched a TV screen provided by Vivandi that allowed picnickers to observe Bové’s live interviews with major French TV channels just outside the building. During the interviews, protestors inside the building cheered as Bové drew connections between the privatization of water and the privatization of the world’s seed supply through agricultural biotechnology. “What will be left?” Bové asked the reporter. “Once the world’s corporations control everything, what will they privatize next, the air?”
Chapter Ten

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY DISCOURSE:
AN ALTER-GLOBALIZATION FRAMING OF FOOD

Central to the postindustrial condition is the explosion of alternative discourses on food. Discourses on food risk and quality are often employed by actors on both sides of debates on food systems, providing means to legitimate a range of claims about the value and meaning of food. Bové and his political allies have played a key role in defining and disseminating an alternative food discourse. Perhaps the most central and key discourse on food that emerges during the 1990s and early 2000s is food sovereignty. In 1996, La Via Campesina formally adopted the term food sovereignty at the UN-sponsored World Food Summit in Rome. The World Food Summit has served as a central site for those in the alter-globalization movement who are focused on food and agriculture. The summit is coordinated by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Activists in 1996 held their own countersummit to discuss global food-related crises and asserted the sovereign right that all communities should have in determining their own food supply (Desmarais et al. 2010, 21). A revealing set of keywords is embedded in the “Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action.” Terms such as rights, nutritious, hunger, and population appear repeatedly in the two-page document, emphasizing the food predicament of inhabitants of the Global South. The document describes the causes of hunger in southern nations:

– Constraints on access to food
– Inadequacy of household and national incomes
– Man-made disasters
– Increased population
– Conflict, terrorism, corruption, environmental degradation

There are problematic patterns of consumption and production in industrialized countries. This World Food Summit document suggests a technique of governance that runs through supranational bodies by addressing questions of food and agriculture. Exercised power is discreet and veiled, normalizing a set of hunger-inducing practices driven by industrial nations. The term trade is used abundantly in this two-page declaration. Yet the authors acknowledge no link between neoliberal trade practices and the lack of available food or farmable land for southern smallholders. Instead, the
document’s creators make vague references to problems such as “man-made disasters” or “unsustainable” consumption and production in industrialized countries that contribute to world hunger.

Such omissions are central to the study of a “sociology of absences” described by de Sousa Santos (2006, 15). De Sousa Santos explores how powerful institutions often create situations in which “what exists is in fact actively produced as non-existent” (2006, 15). The World Food Summit’s omission of subaltern actors “wastes the social experiences” (2006, 18) of smallholders and indigenous peoples who hold crucial knowledges about food and agriculture. While the document “makes absent” powerless victims of neoliberal agricultural policy, it also obscures powerful institutions and policies that cause their disempowerment. Discussions of the WTO, as well as structural adjustment programs and southern debt, are conspicuously absent. The World Food Summit declaration shrinks the world of what de Sousa Santos calls “the field of credible experiences” (2006, 18). In doing so, the declaration erases local knowledges about on-the-ground mechanisms that reproduce everyday cultures of hunger and poverty in the Global South (euphemized as “food insecurity” in the declaration).

The countersummit of 1996 was called the Forum on Food Security. Actors from La Via Campesina, the Confédération Paysanne, and other organizations took language into their own hands, deciding in the future to replace the term food security with food sovereignty. It was there that food sovereignty discourse was born. As de Sousa Santos suggests, food sovereignty discourse empowers agents by transforming them from passive and invisible objects into active and agents of power. For de Sousa Santos, we need discourse that “transforms impossible into possible objects, and non-credible subjects into visible credible subjects” (2006, 15). Food sovereignty discourse grasps elusive impossible objects, such as neoliberal capitalism, that insidiously drive global food systems. By making the machinations of food scarcity visible and understandable, actors in these groups also transform themselves into “visible credible subjects” who are otherwise erased and trivialized.

The World Food Summit was clearly a site of discursive creativity and gave rise to a new and powerful narrative about food sovereignty. The summit was also a site for creative direct action. Bové and several activists sauntered into a field of genetically modified olive trees just outside the city. In true satirical style for the union, Bové covered the tips of several branches.
with condoms. As symbols of reproductive protection, the condoms called attention to the problem of cross-pollination between trees that were genetically modified and those that were not. This symbolic and humorous event was recorded in many websites and news stories around the world. It helped others make the link between gmos and the increasing global threat against local and national food sovereignty.

THE TRANSITION FROM FOOD SECURITY TO FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

The transition from the term security to sovereignty is an interesting cultural-linguistic discursive move worthy of examination. Food sovereignty discourse widens what de Sousa Santos calls “the field of credible experiences” (2006, 17). By drawing once again on Raymond Williams’s attention to keywords, we can see how specific terms emerge at particular historical junctures, both reflecting and producing societal realities (1976). The keyword security functions to normalize and even erase many of the causes and effects of food scarcity. In contrast, the keyword sovereignty expands the horizons of what could be thought and said about the causes and effects of hunger, landlessness, and neoliberalism generally. The term food security is problematic and complex. In the Global North, notions of food security invoke a consumer idiom bound up in ideas of food risk or safety related to gmos, mad cow disease, and so on. Food security discourses arise as powerful institutions pair the militaristic term security (associated with state power) with the term food. Together the terms form what Williams calls a “semantic cluster” capable of symbolizing a nation’s ability to protect its population from hunger-related harm. The concept fails, however, to problematize food-production method and scale and the commodification of food in a global market. Food security discourse is central to a postindustrial agricultural condition. It promotes paternalistic and neocolonial agendas to send so-called food aid to impoverished southern nations. Yet it does so without understanding how the many farmers of southern nations came to be landless in the first place. Powerful institutions rarely state how and why such peoples became unable to feed their communities as they had for thousands of years before the colonial period. Food aid can abate starvation for many people in poor countries in the short term. But in the long term, it perpetuates a trend of postindustrial dumping of cheap subsidized industrial foodstuffs from the Global North to the Global South. Ironically, practices and discourses surrounding food aid legitimize and reproduce the model of
capital-driven industrial agriculture that perpetuates the cycle of global hunger among the landless. By moving from discourses on food security to sovereignty, subaltern actors made visible their right to produce their own food rather than simply receive aid in the name of bolstering food security.

At the countersummit that ran parallel to the World Food Summit in Rome that year, activists from the Forum for Food Sovereignty presented their own statement, “The Declaration of Nyéléni.” I identified the topic of each paragraph and the keywords that surface in each one:

– The right to food and food sovereignty. Keywords: rights, safe, nutritious, healthy, domestic markets (the text’s authors use the keyword rights five times in the six-line paragraph).
– Access to, management of, and local control of natural resources. Keywords: Access, management, local control, natural resources, genetic resources, land, water, livelihoods, sustainable.
– Small-scale family and community-based agroecological food production. Keywords: agroecology, production systems, sustainable.
– Trade and food sovereignty. Keywords: equitable, fair-trade system, development, human rights.

The differences between the objectives of the World Food Summit and its opponent, the Forum for Food Sovereignty, are too numerous to go into at length here. However, it is valuable to analyze some of the language that World Food Summit officials deploy when pointing to various actors in the global food arena. The World Food Summit actors invoke a particularly charged keyword, the ecumenical we, when referring to those in powerful northern nations who have composed their declaration. When speaking about southern actors, they deploy abstract and generic keywords such as everyone, populations, people, men and women, and future generations.

The authors of “The Declaration of Nyéléni” use language quite differently. They describe peoples around the world with keywords that suggest specific groups or communities of actors, such as individuals, groups, peoples, and nations. The Nyéléni authors also cast actors in terms of cultural identity or rural vocation by describing them as small-scale farmers, peasants, fisher-folk, pastoralists, and Indigenous Peoples. In contrast, the authors of the World Food Summit document never refer to the cultural identities or specific food systems associated with southern actors. By invoking those disenfranchised from the global food system in this generic way, World Food Summit actors
contribute to a sociology of absences. They invisibilize subaltern actors by 
omitting them from a document crafted by a powerful institution.

For the authors of the World Food Summit document, personhood and 
agency rest in the hands of leaders of powerful countries and institutions. 
The peoples they seek to serve are presented as passive recipients of the sum-
mit’s sound food policy. By invoking food sovereignty discourse, the authors 
of “The Declaration of Nyéléni” linguistically reclaim personal and commu-
nity agency. Through choosing a particular set of terms, they identify them-
seves as peoples who have the ability to produce food for themselves. They 
suggest that problems such as hunger are the result of powerful nations who 
are unwilling to grant the poor access to adequate land and waterways nec-
essary for community-based agriculture.

By discursively shifting from a language of food security to food sov-
ereignty, actors suggest a transfer in the locus of control. The term *sover-
eignty* implies a kind of autonomy among subaltern actors whose presence 
and agency are discursively erased from the global food picture, dissolving 
them into faceless populations (Morton and Spivak 2007, 16). The keyword 
*sovereignty* suggests a meaningful shift in how subaltern actors choose to 
understand themselves. Yet, as with many terms, *sovereignty* has a checkered 
past. As Foucault points out, the term *sovereignty* dates back to the twelfth 
century and suggests a monarch’s power over a territory and his or her ability 
to rule over others by enforcing codified law (1991, 97). The modern meaning 
of sovereignty was formalized in the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648. Accord-
ning to this treaty, the monarch’s state, territories, and borders should enjoy 
supremacy over the church. Paradoxically, the notion of food sovereignty 
invoked by subaltern actors appropriates the idea of state sovereignty associ-
ated with authoritarian and feudal forms of centralized power. States them-
seves invoke the term *sovereignty* to challenge some aspects of globalization 
that they find problematic. According to many analysts of globalization, the 
rise of the WTO and other supranational bodies threaten state authority (see 
Barfield 2001; Slaughter 1997). *Sovereignty* as a keyword is associated with 
at least three sets of meanings when invoked in different cultural contexts. 
For some historians, the term suggests the monarchical state seeking asy-
lum from the church. For state agents representing member countries of the 
WTO, sovereignty is a way to describe the state as vulnerable and worthy of 
defense. For subaltern actors, sovereignty entails the self-determination of 
local on-the-ground communities.
The WTO often regards discourses on state sovereignty as “protectionist” (Jackson 2006). States attempting to protect domestic markets from cheaper imported products today are often disciplined with sanctions by agents of the trade body. When southern countries protest dumping, actors often invoke the term state sovereignty as a discursive intervention aimed at safeguarding their own agricultural and rural lifeways—without having their concerns trivialized as protectionist. Although many alter-globalization activists identify as antiauthoritarian, they draw upon a term historically embedded in discourses of state power. They extend the idea of sovereignty to discourses of food and agriculture. And so it is that the keyword sovereignty, historically used to defend the sovereign power of monarchs or nation-states, morphs into a counterhegemonic discourse. Food sovereignty discourse tilts the discursive frame surrounding food issues. Those who invoke the term focus beyond questions of production methods associated with discourses on food’s sustainability, safety, quality, or organic certification. Food sovereignty discourse transfers the “food frame” from an instrumental discourse of costs and benefits into a far less calculable and far more complex human rights discourse. It points to the human right to feed communities by using local land areas. Food sovereignty discourse establishes food as a political and economic entity that must be extricated from a system based on long-distance and free-trade-based global markets. In this way, notions of food sovereignty have much in common with discourses on “local foods” narratives that promote food production for direct-sale markets. Food sovereignty discourse links food shortages and global hunger to a sociopolitical system embedded in the neoliberal model.

Actors and organizations such as Bové, the Confédération Paysanne, and La Via Campesina have worked for years to circulate food sovereignty discourse through various national and international forums. In addition, they employ the discourse as a lobbying tool at UN institutions, especially the Food and Agriculture Organization and Human Rights Council. Since 1996, Bové has worked within La Via Campesina to promote food sovereignty discourse. In February 2007 he was a central figure with La Via Campesina when five hundred delegates from more than eighty countries adopted “The Declaration of Nyéléni.” And in July 2007, Bové was invited to be a key speaker on food sovereignty by the Korean Peasant League and the Korean Woman Peasant Association at the Korean Social Forum—a branch of the World Social Forum. On the website for La Via Campesina, Korean there is
ample coverage of this event. In a story on the Forum on Food Sovereignty in Korea, there is a photograph of a Korean peasant and Bové standing side by side, in solidarity, in a green field. The two men wore nearly matching plaid shirts, smiling while forming peace signs with their hands. As the story on the website states, Bové and others from La Via Campesina had come to the Korean Social Forum to “establish and spread the concept of food sovereignty in Korea, to get a better understanding of the food sovereignty situation in other countries[,] ... to create a strategy for the Korean people movements for the implementation of food sovereignty, and to create a national network to materialize food sovereignty in the farmers-consumer relations in the future.” We see the way that food sovereignty discourse is clearly a form of resistance to a technique of governance in domains of food. Bové works to spread the discourse, enrolling other groups into adopting the term. By aligning a wide set of groups under the banner of food sovereignty, alter-globalization activists hope to more effectively resist the disciplining powers of the WTO.

Actors like Bové teach groups to recast problems of food related to the WTO into discourses of food sovereignty. In so doing, Bové enacts a counterhegemony that may be internationalized and solidified. By invoking food sovereignty discourse, Bové and others turn the discursive tables, displacing food-related language used by the WTO. Simply by framing food in terms of sovereignty, subaltern actors inspire others to frame food according to a solidarity-based logic of social justice, self-determination, and cultural autonomy. According to Bové, there are trade practices as troubling as the WTO. Bové and the union are concerned with Economic Partnership Agreements that represent micro-level trade agreements that focus on smaller, more malleable clusters of vulnerable countries (personal communication, July 12, 2007). Through Economic Partnership Agreements, neoliberal trade agents manipulate poorer countries in more insidious ways. Bové is concerned about these more private trade agreements that exist outside the national spotlight. Economic Partnership Agreements have been forged among Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines and between Indonesia and Japan. They have been brokered between EU states and many African countries as well. In these agreements, nations are often coerced into trading their agricultural products for services such as electricity or telecommunications. In addition, state agents trade land that peasants use for subsis-
Postindustrial Paysans in a Post-Seattle World

tence agriculture for areas to be used for industrial and other landfill waste (Stevens 2006).

THE CODEX ALIMENTARIUS VERSUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY DISCOURSE

On the food front, state sovereignty and food sovereignty are often at odds with supranational institutions such as the Codex Alimentarius. Since the WTO was formed in 1994, the Codex Alimentarius has served as the sole body charged with evaluating a country’s claims against importing foodstuffs they consider problematic. In other words, the Codex Alimentarius is the sole body that can allow a particular state to keep a specific foodstuff from being imported into its borders. And once again the singular criterion accepted by the Codex Alimentarius for rejecting a foodstuff is risk. The UN originally established the Codex Alimentarius in 1962. Its mission was to serve as a trade commission that would regulate issues of food trade. According to many in the alter-globalization movement, the Codex has become an undemocratic body that protects the interests of corporations rather than citizens destined to eat the foodstuffs it approves. According to many farmers in the Confédération Paysanne, the Codex has been overtaken by the interests of multinationals. At numerous meetings at the union headquarters, paysans discussed frustrations with the ways in which the Codex engaged in pharmaceuticals, agro-chemicals, and biotechnology, as well as other domains. During meetings discussing the WTO and agriculture, paysans expressed frustration regarding the ways in which a powerful international body like the Codex could control what kinds of foods France would be obliged to import.

Although corporations produce the foodstuffs that are presented to the Codex Alimentarius for approval, the Codex does not hold corporations responsible for proving that foodstuffs are risk free. Instead it requires member-states to execute such research. In many cases, member-states refuse to import a foodstuff approved by the Codex Alimentarius without being able to scientifically prove that there is no significant risk. This was the case when the EU refused to import hormone-treated beef. In such cases, countries face harsh economic sanctions for failing to comply with Codex Alimentarius norms. In this way, the Codex Alimentarius is a disciplining power for coercing member-states to align themselves with the objectives of the WTO.
Testing foodstuffs for potential risks is a lengthy, expensive, and complex process. Codex Alimentarius supporters know that few states or grassroots organizations have the capacity to execute risk-based studies. A nation’s science bodies are increasingly dependent on private corporations for research monies. Yet corporations producing foodstuffs associated with hormones or GMOs, for instance, need their products to be accepted by the Codex Alimentarius. Thus they are often uninterested in conducting such risk-based research.

The Codex Alimentarius is yet another instance of governmentality in the neoliberal network that upholds the WTO. While promising to protect consumer safety when it comes to food, the Codex subtly compels member-states to become docile bodies that will abide by an instrumental rationality of risk. Issues of social-economic justice, solidarity, and the integrity of social fabrics are deemed irrelevant to matters of free trade. As an antidote to bodies such as the Codex, discourses on state sovereignty function as a form of governmentality. In this instance, one powerful institution attempts to exert rule over the other. In the name of state sovereignty, WTO member-states confront the Codex, invoking a state’s rights to protect its populations as an indirect means to contest the power, reach, and legitimacy of supranational bodies such as the WTO (Slaughter 1997, 195). In table 2, we can see two distinct discourses about food, each with its own set of opposing rationalities. While one draws from neoliberal and industrial narratives about food, the other draws from discourses on food sovereignty.

The European Referendum, a Run for President, Parliament, and a New Social Movement

FIGHTING EUROPEAN PRIVATIZATION

From 2003 to 2004, Bové focused more closely on the European front. Concerned with the instrumental logic of privatization, Bové sought to publicize the EU’s intent to establish a European constitution that contained a set of neoliberal economic mandates designed to encourage competition for services among member-states. According to the proposed constitution, European member-states would be unable to maintain autonomy in designing their own public health or education systems. Instead, private corporations would compete to “buy” and manage those services within the EU. Most public services would thus be subject to free-market competition. A range
Table 2. Neoliberal industrial discourse versus food sovereignty discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGRICULTURAL ISSUE</th>
<th>NEOLIBERAL INDUSTRIAL DISCOURSE</th>
<th>FOOD SOVEREIGNTY DISCOURSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food rationality</td>
<td>Food is a fungible commodity.</td>
<td>Food is a human right linked to culture, identity, and self-determination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural rationality</td>
<td>Production is for exports and for the agri-foods industry. Only those who can produce food industrially and efficiently should do so.</td>
<td>Production is for local markets everywhere. All rural peoples have the right to produce food.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food-pricing rationality</td>
<td>Free market should determine food prices.</td>
<td>Farmers and communities must determine prices that allow for quality of life and food.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade rationality</td>
<td>Free trade and deregulation stimulate a robust agricultural economy.</td>
<td>Food and agriculture must be removed from all free-trade agreements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food-related health rationality</td>
<td>If the Codex Alimentarius approves a foodstuff as posing no significant threat to health, that food is acceptable and must be imported.</td>
<td>Local communities should be able to determine if a food is healthy (e.g., not containing hormones, gmos, high-fructose corn syrup, toxic residues, and sugar and fat) and worthy of importation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunger rationality</td>
<td>Hunger is caused by low productivity associated with overpopulation and ineffective industrial production.</td>
<td>Hunger is caused by smallholders’ lack of access to land and water and by problems of social inequality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource rationality</td>
<td>Resources such as land, water, and forests should be privatized and controlled by corporations and governments.</td>
<td>Local communities should control their own resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seed rationality</td>
<td>Seeds are a patentable commodity to be genetically modified by multinationals tailoring to the industrial model. GM seeds will stop hunger, solve environmental problems, and improve health.</td>
<td>Seeds are integral to a biological commons and should never be patented. Farmers should always be free to improve, save, or exchange their own seeds. GM seeds interfere with these practices and are generally harmful to health and the environment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Ten

Table 2. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGRICULTURAL ISSUE</th>
<th>NEOLIBERAL INDUSTRIAL DISCOURSE</th>
<th>FOOD SOVEREIGNTY DISCOURSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support-to-farmers</td>
<td>Private banks, governments, and corporations should provide rural credit, loans, and subsidies (when possible).</td>
<td>Each country should provide support for smallholders through subsidies and fair loaning and credit practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export rationality</td>
<td>Free trade allows northern countries to fairly and freely sell or donate their surpluses to needy, poor southern nations.</td>
<td>Dumping allows northern countries to destroy southern food economies by saturating them with cheap subsidized foodstuffs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smallholder</td>
<td>Smallholders (who do not produce efficiently through the industrial model) should be dramatically reduced.</td>
<td>Smallholders are stewards of seed, lands, and water. Their local knowledges and understanding of internal markets is necessary for creating healthy agricultural systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smallholder</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsidy rationality</td>
<td>Subsidies allow large-scale northern industrial farmers to produce needed surpluses for agri-foods and export markets.</td>
<td>Northern subsidies lead to dumping. If used ethically, subsidies can be directed toward family farmers to support direct sale and sustainable farming.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of public services including transportation, postal, and public utilities would become privatized and directed by corporations. For Bové, the logic of this constitution represented yet another egregious example of what he calls a “world for sale” (Bové 2001). As we have seen, agriculture is privatized when multinationals attain monopolies on seed production and agrochemical inputs through biological patents. In the same way, multinational corporations work with the WTO and state bodies to allow public services to be privatized. Vandana Shiva calls the biological patent an infringement on the “biological commons” (1999), and Bové and paysans also feel strongly that public services should constitute a public commons under citizen control.

In 2005 Bové and his supporters worked with representatives of The Netherlands to form a bloc strong enough to stop the proposed constitution. On May 29, 2005, 55 percent of the French electorate voted against adopting
the constitution. This vote sent shockwaves across Europe (anonymous Confédération Paysanne paysan, personal communication, May 21, 2005). Political agents who supported the constitution spoke out vigorously against the grassroots mobilization that led citizens to reject it. Many supporters framed popular critique of the constitution as a vote against the neoliberal direction that the EU is currently taking (Hainsworth 2006). As is often the case in the alter-globalization movement, members of the extreme Right in France were aligned with the far Left in rejecting the constitution. Both sides regarded the constitution as a form of political and economic centralization that would compromise state sovereignty. Strangely, most French trade unions supported the constitution. The Confédération Paysanne received significant press coverage for departing from the overall trend among French trade unions. It was openly criticized for rejecting the constitution on the basis that it purportedly supported a neoliberal system (de Boisgrollier and Gordon 2005, 17).

**BOVÉ FOR PRESIDENT AND PARLIAMENT**

Two years after the referendum, Bové continued to focus on neoliberalism, this time using the French electoral system as a forum for raising awareness and support for an antineoliberal movement in France. In February 2007, Bové announced that he and his “antiliberal” party (*liberal* is the French term for neoliberal) would enter the public sphere of the race for the presidency. Deciding it was time to “decree an electoral uprising against economic liberalism,” Bové threw his hat into the ring, focusing his campaign on issues such as environment and globalization (*Independent* 2007). French critics of Bové compared his run for president to Ralph Nader’s controversial U.S. campaign of 2000. Many feared that Bové, like Nader, would further fracture France’s divided Left. They were concerned his run could increase right-wing Sarkozy’s chances to win.

Undeterred, Bové continued his presidential campaign. On March 12, 2007, Bové appeared on the French television show *Les 4 vérités*. At the time of the interview, he was both preparing for his campaign and awaiting the court’s decision for crop pulls conducted in 2005. Bové was well aware that he would face either house arrest (obliged to wear an electronic bracelet), a night-prison sentence, or a standard prison sentence. Bové was asked by the interviewer how he felt about the sentencing. He responded: “It’s a political decision. . . . Clearly, if I’m wearing an electronic bracelet or am obliged to
return to prison each night, I will be unable to circulate. I’m an activist. I’m using the electoral system as a way to communicate a clear antineoliberal message. Clearly, they are conducting their own prison campaign as a way to make my own political campaign impossible” (my translation). Bové explained during this interview that his presidential campaign created a space in which he could bring together members of the Communist and Green Parties as well as citizens to fight for a unified cause. In this interview Bové explains why he chose to run for president: “You can’t change society without challenging the logic of the WTO, the European trade agreements, and the privatization of public services. We don’t just want a new referendum for a different European constitution. We want a new European citizen, not a European free market. Sarkozy is a dangerous man. I will do all I can to fight the Right.” Bové’s position was clear. By asserting the need for more than a series of single objectives, he called for a new logic. Through his campaign, he articulated the need for a “new European citizen,” one infused with a rationality built out of solidarity rather than capitalist individualism.

By March 2007, Bové secured the forty thousand signatures from citizens and five hundred signatures from elected officials necessary to enter the race. He thus became one of eleven candidates to run for the presidency. Yet on April 22 he learned that he lacked a majority vote needed to continue on to the main election. In the primaries, Bové had received 1.32 percent of the popular vote, equaling 483,000 votes. On May 6, right-wing candidate Sarkozy was elected president.

According to a key union secretary, Pascale R., from the start everyone at the union considered Bové’s run symbolic. They saw his campaign as potentially opening a space in which to stimulate public debate. “You have to admit, though,” said Pascale R., “close to half a million votes was something. It showed there’s a voice in this country that would like to be heard” (personal communication, April 19, 2008). Bové’s run for the presidency kept the union’s name and vision of solidarity in the press. During this time, the union was able to further extend its visibility and potency in the French media. As in his early years of celebrity, wherever Bové traveled, so went the name of the union. And as usual, the media presented Bové as “former leader of the Confédération Paysanne” even though the nonhierarchical union has no leaders per se.

Undeterred by his symbolic, yet failed, run for president, Bové decided to run for the European Parliament in 2009. By the time parliamentary elections
were held, he was the top candidate for the southwestern European constituency. He was chosen as a member of Europe Ecologie, a powerful coalition of environmentalist political parties, including the Green Party. Europarltv reported that on June 7, 2009, Europe Ecologie won more than 16 percent in a proportional election system. Bové sees his role as parliamentarian as a mandate to keep issues such as GMOS at the forefront of public environmental discourse. He has tremendous support in this endeavor: to date, twenty-three out of twenty-seven members of the European Parliament are against lifting the de facto moratorium on genetically modified crops. But, as usual, Bové’s focus is not fused to a single issue such as GMOS. He continues to contextualize single issues within a broader economic and social system that could shape a new world where a solidarity-based logic infuses education, environment, and work. Bové said to me in an interview: “We must transcend the logic of the market. We must focus on education and environment—issues faced by everyone. As for the question of agriculture, it is clear that farmers across the world must be able to make a viable living from their work” (personal communication, February 18, 2009).

Amies de la Confédération Paysanne and les Faucheurs volontaires: Back on the Larzac Track

As Bové’s popularity soared in the early years after the McDo incident, the union received much media coverage, flagging the organization as a dynamic site for civic attention and activism. For months the union was inundated with calls and e-mails from French activists outside the farming world seeking to join paysans’ demonstrations and other activities. In 2000, the union founded the organization Amies de la Confédération Paysanne (Friends of the Confédération Paysanne). Since its formation, the association has offered an engaging website, conferences, and other events that provide a forum where those outside the farming world may work together with paysans to fight for a shared cause. Amies de la Confédération Paysanne is an exciting example of the new social movements that are emerging across various postindustrial, post-Marxist landscapes. Here we see the rise of sectors of civil society questioning systems of food production as well as the rationality behind industrial capitalism itself. The post-Marxist nature of such endeavors speaks to the rise of movements that focus beyond questions of labor and class. Dedicated to preserving paysan identity and culture, Amies de la Confédération Paysanne also addresses problems of GMOS and antinuclear
activism and provides ways for activists to join international discussions and actions related to food sovereignty and free trade.

Amies de la Confédération Paysanne has a key historical precedent, the Larzac. When that movement came to a close in 1981, a group of paysans in the south-central Avéyron region established the Larzac Foundation in 1982. Paysans created the foundation, seeking to sustain an arena in which farmers and nonfarmers could continue to support each other’s political goals. After the events surrounding Bové and McDo in 1999, the foundation changed its name to Larzac-Solidarités (Larzac in Solidarity). Today, Larzac-Solidarités focuses still on paysans’ rights, and it also works to promote French antinuclear activism and conducts Palestinian support work. Today, Amies de la Confédération Paysanne and Larzac-Solidarités represent crucial bridges between French rural and urban worlds. Such alliances are still relatively novel in a country that has traditionally located political activity within domains of political parties and unions.

The Confédération Paysanne is the first major French union to become a truly heterogeneous entity, establishing robust activist forums for actors whose identities extend beyond realms of agriculture, labor, and class. Beginning in 2004, Bové and the union launched yet another successful civil society initiative, the Faucheurs Volontaires (Voluntary Reapers). The Faucheurs Volontaires are a group of paysans and nonfarmers from across France who echo the spirit of the Larzac. The Faucheurs Volontaires’ main activity is engaging in almost monthly crop pulls of genetically modified crops growing in open-air field trials throughout the country. Using the union’s comical and rhetorical style, the Faucheurs Volontaires describes its crop pulls as “neutralizing gmos” (neutralisant) the way one might neutralize a toxic substance or a dangerous force, rendering it harmless (personal communication with an anonymous faucheur, September 21, 2010). Whereas nonfarmers had often participated informally in Confédération Paysanne crop pulls, the formation of the Faucheurs Volontaires formalized their involvement in anti-gmo actions.

When the Faucheurs Volontaires was first founded, the group applied for, but was denied, the political and economic status awarded French nonprofit associations. The Faucheurs Volontaires is a bit of a French anomaly, acting more like an autonomous grassroots organization than an official association or party. French grassroots movements that lie outside political parties,
unions, or government-approved associations have limited history and political clout. The relative success of the Faucheurs Volontaires thus represents a historically intriguing coup for its members. Linked to but independent of the Confédération Paysanne, the Faucheurs Volontaires unites alter-globalization youths, ordinary citizens, and members and leaders of ecology and consumer groups. During crop pulls, Faucheurs Volontaires members tread through field tests and commercialized sites, symbolically or literally reaping plants, sometimes wearing hazard suits in the style of Greenpeace, and other times dressed in jeans and T-shirts. Building on the post-McDo sensibility that sent a message of inclusivity and expansiveness to those outside the farming world, the Faucheurs Volontaires also retains the sensibility of May 1968. Protestors often wear whimsical costumes, banging on drums and dancing in the streets during rallies and political actions.

Since their introduction to France in the early 1990s, nearly all genetically modified crops cultivated in France have gone through experimental field tests. In such field tests, a private company or public science body (or both) pays an individual farmer to plant and harvest experimental crops. The precise location of such experiments, by law, must be posted at the local prefecture or town hall of a municipality. Such public postings make field tests identifiable to anti-gmo activists intent on conducting crop pulls.

Various Faucheurs Volontaires members place their videos of particular actions on the Internet. In many of the videos, one can see Bové, other paysans, and anti-gmo activists marching through fields, breaking cornstalks in a jovial fashion. Because all of the videos are made by French activists and are in French, I’ll describe one I found that is typical of the kind posted.

In March 2006, I found a video titled “Fauchage 2006.” In the video an anonymous young man faces the camera, seated in a car on the way to an action. He states the date, February 2, 2006, saying, “This is my first Faucheur action. I’m kind of excited about it.” He states that the Faucheurs Volontaires members that day will number three hundred and will take down fifteen hectares of genetically modified corn. In the next scene we see a group of activists composed primarily of young men and women along with a few older activists. In a sort of scattered fashion, the group makes its way to a dirt road facing a set of cornfields. Some are wearing T-shirts with the Faucheurs Volontaires logo and graphic. Several young men amble around shirtless, sporting long dreads. In the next sequence, Bové appears on the scene,
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holding a small megaphone and directing the crowd. In his usual rapid-fire, no-nonsense speaking style, he directs everyone to stay in line, one behind the other, as they make their way through the field. “Stay together,” he warns the group. Those who have conducted crop pulls are aware of the hazards associated with the practice. In addition to getting terribly lost in the great maze of cornfields, activists are at risk of getting quietly picked away from the scene by police. As the group sets off into the fields, there is an air of celebration. Over the sound of snapping corn, the video captures the activists giggling, cheering each other on as they break cornstalks over their knees. This action is a symbolic reaping because the activists are breaking the cornstalks rather than gathering them in garbage bags to subsequently plop before a town hall.

As the scene progresses, a few police officers appear in the field, as well as some press. Bové stands among the busy Faucheurs Volontaires members, speaking into a series of microphones. He talks in serious tones about the lack of public debate on gmos as well as their dangers and implications for the world’s farmers. As this scene unfolds, the few police officers stand with crossed arms, wearing bemused expressions. Some appear to be bantering good-naturedly with activists who are still busy at work thwacking stalks of corn over their knees. At the end of this sequence, the field is determined done. Bové asks the Faucheurs Volontaires members to remain in their groups as they return from the cornfield to the road. As they file out of the field in lines, the activists chant, “J’en veux pas des ogm” (I don’t want no gmos). Back on the dirt road, Bové explains that the owner of the field is about to arrive, bringing with him more police officers. He instructs the group members to decide who among them will volunteer to be arrested. By signing their names on police officers’ clipboards, the participants admit to committing an act of civil disobedience. From the video, it appears about ten Faucheurs Volontaires volunteer to be arrested along with Bové.

In the next scene an energetic rally explodes outside the police station as the Faucheurs Volontaires members who were not arrested await the arrival of their arrested comrades by police car. When the vehicles arrive, several of the free members conduct a temporary sit-in before the car, blocking its passage. Meanwhile, a dreadlocked, shirtless young man sings and plays his guitar in a reggae style, smiling and laughing before a shaky handheld camera. A helicopter eerily hovers over the small and impromptu rally. After the arrested Faucheurs Volontaires members are escorted into the police station,
the rally steps up its energy as night falls. Nearly everyone in the crowd is tapping on some type of metal object. While an older woman in a wheelchair smiles, ringing a small bell, young men hammer their hands on street signs, bang on the windows of the police building, and beat on drums, cymbals, and tin can lids. All together the demonstrators chant at hypnotic speed, “Liberez nos comrades! Liberez nos comrades!” (Free our comrades!). In the final scene a man exits the police station and informs the crowd that the arrested will not be detained. Everyone cheers and more drumming ensues.

From 2003 to 2004, forty-nine individuals were arrested for destroying several Monsanto-funded field trials. In many instances, activists were tried in tribunals rather than regular courts of law. In France, tribunals are often created in small towns or villages where a formal court of law does not exist. In December 2005, after a well-publicized trial, the court of Orléans made a historic decision when it dropped charges against the forty-nine arrested. According to the judge, the Faucheurs Volontaires members acted out of necessity, asserting that the state had not provided adequate and necessary precautions and had thus failed to protect human rights to a healthy environment (José Bové, personal communication, April 18, 2006).

In July 2008, the struggle of the Faucheurs Volontaires and the Confédération Paysanne continued. The Confédération Paysanne published a press release titled “ogm: Le Principe de precaution pour preserver des paysans droit de travailler” (gmos: The precaution principle to preserve the paysan’s right to work) (Confédération Paysanne 2008b). According to the press release from July 2, 2008, five activists faced the local judge of Carcassone to address crop pulls carried out in 2006 in Trebes (in the Aude region of France). Using its signature rhetorical style, the union stated that the activists in question were participating in “citizen-based ‘research’ on mon810 corn,” and that by arresting them, state bodies were obstructing paysans’ “right to work” (my translation). According to this logic, the Faucheurs Volontaires members, as French citizens, were assisting the union in carrying out important research-based work necessary to maintaining paysans’ status as farmers. In response, Monsanto representatives argued that it was in fact their company whose “freedom to work” was obstructed by the Faucheurs Volontaires. At the trial itself, twenty-four Faucheurs Volontaires members stepped forward, joining the arrested five, stating that they too had participated in the research conducted by the group that day. In response, the tribunal formally recognized the collective nature of the research and agreed to frame the event as an act
of civil disobedience rather than a mere act of property damage. In French courts, only paid workers, or members of state-recognized associations, have the right to make “obstructions to work” claims. As Monsanto was neither a worker nor an association, its charges held no weight in the French legal system. Lawyers for the Confédération Paysanne argued that the state itself was responsible for having created a situation in which the Faucheurs Volontaires had become obligated to defend the precaution principle. According to this logic, Monsanto was abusing the precaution principle by planting MON810. Having conducted inadequate field trials for the product, Monsanto was accused of potentially contaminating fields in the area that was GMO free.

The Confédération Paysanne awaited its next appearance before the tribunal on September 17, 2008. The union planned to argue for the incompatibility between genetically modified crops and nonmodified crops in open-air fields. In addition, it invoked critical discourses, including the “monopolization of life” by private corporations such as multinationals. It also made a case for the collective rights of paysans and citizens to protect and maintain a future in which paysans have the right to work to unite as citizens to fight for healthy and quality food (Confédération Paysanne 2008b). Once again the Confédération Paysanne effectively stretched the discursive field beyond questions of GMO-related risk. In addition to talking about food safety, it also invoked solidarity-based notions of workers’ rights, the rights of ordinary citizens to healthy and quality food, and the commoditization of life.

Two years later, Faucheurs Volontaires was still in full swing and continued to address current GMO-related issues and participate in trials that dragged on for years. In February 2010, the union issued the following press release: “ogm, Malgré la moratoire: Le procé continue, le combat continue!” (gmos, Despite the moratorium: The trial continues, the combat continues!) According to the press release, Bové and Isabelle Ibarrondo (a paysan from the Herault region of France) faced a judge in Beziers just a few days prior. The two were summoned for participating in a symbolic crop pull of 14 square meters (150 square feet) of Monsanto’s MON810 corn along with 150 other Faucheurs Volontaires members in August 2007. Taking emblematic Faucheurs Volontaires action, activists dumped a truckload of uprooted genetically modified corn before a police station, and the officers agreed that the pile was a public menace. Activists in turn demanded that police ask the French government to respect its moratorium on cultivating GMOS. Just
three months earlier, out of respect to the precaution principle, the government had finally put the moratorium in place. For Bové and Ilbarrondo, the state’s actions were contradictory. While recommitting itself to the precaution principle, the government accused the Faucheurs Volontaires of wrongdoing. According to the Confédération Paysanne’s press release, “the state is denying a collective and deeply anchored social movement that has continually refused GMOS in France. Despite the moratorium, the GMO menace persists along with the trials against them. The combat will thus continue!” The union announced its continued support for Bové and Ilbarrondo during their trial.

Faucheurs Volontaires continued to keep both the union and the GMO issue on the French map. In addition, each arrest and trial served to use the legal system as a forum in which to conduct public debate on social issues. The GMO issue is economic, cultural, and political in nature. Single issues such as GMOS are inseparable from broader issues such as the vitality of the rural sphere and the commoditization of life in general. The union kept the nation’s finger on the pulse of a wider set of questions regarding the kind of logic that should infuse agriculture or life itself. Should it be one of instrumental profit or one of solidarity?

GMOS AND FRANCE: LA LUTTE CONTINUED . . .

To understand the place and meaning of the French GMO moratorium, it is useful to look back to the mid-2000s. In February 2006, the WTO announced that Europe had violated international trade policies by restricting the cultivation of genetically modified foods for commercial use. This ruling formally ended the de facto GMO moratorium in Europe that had been in place since 1998. This moratorium, known in France as the Engagements du Grenelle (Grenelle Engagements), emerged from a series of negotiations among a broad and diverse network of actors working to prevent future commercialization of genetically modified seeds in France. While some feared for the future of small French seed companies, others were concerned about problems of irreversibility that occur when genetically modified fields cross-pollinate with other fields and contaminate them permanently. Yet others understood that furthering the model of agriculture associated with GMOS would prove ruinous to the last of French paysans. The fate of the Engagements du Grenelle remained unclear following the ruling by the WTO in
2006. The French presidential elections were only a year away. With a generally anti-GMO political climate in France, no incoming candidate wanted to take a positive stance on GMOs.

At the time, I communicated with a union representative, Alan P., who captured the general feeling at the union: “Commercialized GMOs or experimental GMOs. We don’t want any of it. The WTO’s ruling will not stop our cause.” As the de facto moratorium came to a close, government actors braced themselves for considerable public criticism. In April 2007, France’s new right-wing president, Nicolas Sarkozy, came into power. At first, Sarkozy attempted to maintain public support by skirting the issue of GMOs, deploying ambiguous discourses on food quality and environment. Desperate for popular support, Sarkozy did his best to demonstrate to the public that he had sound environmental politics and would thus protect the nation’s food supply. Later that year, however, Sarkozy capitulated. He publicly stated that France would comply with the WTO’s demand to lift the ban on the commercialization of GMOs on French soil. Even while complying with the trade body, Sarkozy did not want to lose support of the populace. Sarkozy and the ministry of environment publicly announced they would continue to respect the Engagements du Grennelle by maintaining a freeze on all genetically modified seeds, except one variety of Monsanto’s corn, mon810. All other GMO seeds remained banned for commercial use. Bové and the Faucheurs Volontaires were not assuaged by Sarkozy’s promise. According to Bové and many at the union, it would only be a matter of time before Sarkozy broke his agreement to “respect the Engagements du Grennelle” (personal communication with anonymous union national secretary, March, 19, 2007). Indeed, one month after Sarkozy stated he would respect the Engagements du Grennelle, he announced that this decision would remain in place only until the completion of a full review of GMO technologies, which would be done by February 9, 2008.

Preempting Sarkozy’s February 2008 decision, Bové and the Faucheurs Volontaires launched a campaign one month before Sarkozy’s verdict was due. They used a Gandhian pacifist tactic practiced by members of the new paysan movements of the 1970s: a hunger strike. On January 3, Bové and fifteen members of the Faucheurs Volontaires received significant media attention when they publicly announced a one-month hunger strike during which the fasters would ingest nothing but water. In 1990, Bové conducted a similar hunger strike, drinking only mineral water for eighteen days. At that time,
he was protesting the then president Mitterrand’s proposed changes to agricultural subsidies for farmers. This time, Bové and the other protesters said they would “not eat until the government imposes a year-long ban on genetically modified crops” (translation mine) (Agence France-Presse, January 1, 2008). In television coverage of the event by Canal 2’s evening news on January 2, French viewers watched Bové and fifteen others drag mattresses and bedding up a flight of stairs into an empty studio occupied by press and supporters. When interviewed, Bové asserted the necessity of the strike: “At times like these, what other means of protest are left to us? Protesting in the streets? We are unwilling to passively await the decision of Sarkozy to come out in one month—a decision that might simply be then delayed for yet another month. We want a firm confirmation that Sarkozy will respect the Engagements du Grenelle.”

The term Engagements du Grenelle is historically significant. Protestors initially coined the term Grenelle during negotiations following the May 1968 riots. After a month of intense political conflict, the French labor ministry drew up the Grenelle Engagements at its headquarters on the Rue de Grenelle in Paris. Since that time, the term Grenelle has been generally defined as an inclusive multiparty debate that brings together governmental actors as well as nongovernmental actors such as members of various political associations. As Henri M. at the union suggests, “A Grenelle is like one endless meeting that brings together a bunch of otherwise disparate groups” (personal communication, March 3, 2008). The fusion of the term Grenelle and the GMO issue signaled the continuation of the 1968 sensibility of autonomy that marked this period. Grenelle became a keyword, forming what Williams calls a “network of usage,” clustered with terms such as GMO, neoliberalism, and free trade (1976). Just as 1968 brought together students, workers, university professors, and farmers, the question of GMOs also convened a heterogeneous set of actors such as farmers, consumers, ecologists, and antineoliberalists. This Grenelle articulated a cultural logic that deviated from the instrumental sensibility of capital-driven society.

As for those engaged in the hunger strike, they were able to promptly put an end to their ordeal. Seven days after the strike began, Sarkozy made an agreement to “respect the Engagements du Grenelle” (Agence France Press, January 9, 2008). The de facto moratorium on commercialized seeds (excluding MON810) remained in place. Thus, when the Faucheurs Volontaires conducted its crop pull of MON810 in 2007, it was in direct protest to a
partial moratorium on just one crop perceived as contradictory, unjust, and unacceptable.

On July 14, 2010, Britain’s journal the Ecologist made a dramatic announcement. Journalists wrote that the EU had promised to end the current model for making GMO policy on a European level. Such a move allowed individual European nations the right to determine their own GMO policies (Ecologist 2010). Yet according to M. Rougest, a national secretary at the Confédération Paysanne, this news was not all that it seemed to be: “Now, pro-GMO countries will have the ease of hurrying through the EU authorization process on particular GM crops” (personal communication, January 19, 2000). Stefanie Hundsdorfer echoed this sentiment in the Ecologist, asserting that “individual bans cannot replace a scientifically sound EU-level safety procedure as contamination (from genetically modified crops) does not stop at national borders” (Ecologist 2010, 27). For paysan M. Rouget, “The EU simply wants to appease pro-GMO countries. It just recently authorized the first genetically modified crop in twelve years, a starch potato. The Confédération Paysanne will continue to fight this trend to, little by little, end the moratorium” (personal communication, August 20, 2010).

THE CONFÉDÉRATION PAYSANNE AND THE WTO TODAY: FAILURES AND COLLAPSES?

Since the WTO’s formation in 1994, its meetings have served as focal points for popular protest from civil society groups. While the Battle of Seattle in 1999 garnered the most international attention, the Doha Round of the WTO (that began in 2001) also provided sites for ongoing protests by groups representing disenfranchised sets of small-scale farmers, fishers, workers, indigenous peoples, women’s groups, and citizens’ groups. While protests take place at (or near) WTO sessions, the meetings also spawn protests in capital cities globally. Before and during each meeting, civil society actors from across the world travel to Geneva, reminding delegates of the trade body of their demands. They work continually to remind delegates of the political consequences that may ensue at home should they make damaging compromises (Wallach 2008, 1).

The Doha Round in particular has been marked by a series of seemingly irreconcilable disagreements between rich and poor countries. More often than not, these conflicts lead to meetings described as “failures” and “col-
lapsed.” Drawing from Williams (1976), I assert that failure and collapse have become keywords in discourse related to the WTO. These keywords form networks of usage with other terms such as conflict and public opposition. When using Google to search for the terms WTO and failure, 5,200,000 entries surfaced. Collapse summoned about half as many, 2,770,000 entries. WTO success brought forth only 32,900. After scrolling carefully through pages of WTO success entries, I noted that many references to success were reporters’ speculative hopes for successful outcomes in the future, near successes, or hopes for relative success in a larger context of “failures.” As there are fewer posts written in French on the Internet, it was intriguing to note that when I searched for the French term OMC échec (WTO failure), there were 383,000 entries. OMC conflict rang up 342,000. OMC réussite (success) struck 182,000.

A press statement by Lori Wallach of Public Citizen is an example of the negative narratives that surround the WTO today. Wallach reflects on a collapse of the Doha Round of WTO negotiations that took place in Qatar in July 2008: “Countries’ unwillingness to concede on particular themes is the proximate cause for the collapse, but government positions were based on strong public opposition in many poor and rich nations alike to expanding WTO scope and authority after more than a decade of experience of the WTO’s damaging outcomes. By calling a ministerial summit to try to force agreement on a WTO expansion agenda opposed by many countries, WTO Secretary General Pascal Lamy set up the conditions for yet another direct blow to the beleaguered global commerce agency’s shaky legitimacy” (Wallach 2008, 1). As the director of Public Citizen, Wallach is a major actor in the alter-globalization network. By describing the WTO as “beleaguered” and “shaky,” she speaks indirectly to the role played by civil society in destabilizing the WTO. For Wallach, civil society agents are effectively preventing the organization from expanding its reach, achieving its goals, and marshaling power against poor countries. Actors such as Wallach often describe resistance to the trade body by invoking a social-justice framework. She contrasts a solidarity-based logic of civil society actors against the neoliberal and instrumental profit-seeking logic of the WTO.

At the Confédération Paysanne, a similar discussion emerged regarding the failures associated with the Doha Round. In two press releases issued in July 2008, the Confédération Paysanne comments on the ongoing failure of trade negotiations. According to the union member Dominique Marcel,
“Such failures lead many to consider the future viability and legitimacy of the organization itself” (personal communication, August 15, 2008). As Marcel suggests, trade-related conflicts between northern and southern countries will continue to prevent the organization from opening global markets for the benefit of wealthier nations. As poor countries increasingly receive the support of international progressive grassroots and nongovernmental organizations such as La Via Campesina, leaders of poor nations appear to be emboldened, refusing to accept the disciplining power of the WTO itself.

These are two excerpts taken from the press releases issued in 2008 on July 29 and July 30. Each provides a window into the Confédération Paysanne’s response to the policies of the WTO:

International governments must appreciate the urgency of establishing international rules supporting production, producers, and consumers—rather than economic speculation. India’s and China’s ability to maintain agricultural systems, despite importations, is a step in the right direction toward food sovereignty. We need a global organization that supports the livelihoods of family and small-scale farmers. . . . For years, proponents of free trade promised we’d soon be praising the benefits of open markets. The reality of these last months, with soaring food prices, proves that this is neither the best means for food production nor the best means for distributing food in a climate of popular need. (Confédération Paysanne 2008b; my translation)

The Confédération Paysanne denounces the all-out marketing associated with the WTO. Most countries do not wish to see these negotiations continue. The key points of disagreement rightly concern agriculture. The desire to sell off agriculture, goods, and services for next to nothing, for the sole benefit of commercial exchange, is unacceptable. Any agreement that ends with an obligation to lower the rights to tax [imports] will essentially lead to an unsound agreement. The Confédération Paysanne reasserts that all agricultural policy must focus on the protection of borders. A true study of the effects of deregulated markets must be completed. The absence of protection of agricultural markets means an open door to speculation—a situation that will lead to dramatic consequences in domains of food, society, and ecology. . . . For the sake of food sovereignty, a right that more and more countries demand, the WTO must get out of agriculture! (Confédération Paysanne 2008a; my translation)
We see the ongoing tension played out between an instrumental logic of neoliberal capital and a rationality of solidarity. In the first release, we see the Confédération Paysanne call for international rules that would support peoples rather than speculators. There is a clash between two irreconcilable logics, one humanitarian and the other individualistic and profit-oriented, in “OMC: Un échec porteur d’espoir” (WTO: Failure brings hope). The second release, issued the day after, “OMC: Mieux vaut pas d’accord plutôt qu’une braderie” (WTO: Better forgo an agreement than gain a sell-out), contests the instrumental logic of the WTO, which reduces agriculture, food, goods, and services to mere commodities for commercial exchange. According to these statements, “dramatic consequences” for food, society, and ecology will ensue should the WTO’s instrumental logic be allowed to reign unfettered. Both press releases invoke food sovereignty discourse, demonstrating how this new counterhegemonic discourse is bolstering claims against the WTO. In these releases, the Confédération Paysanne strived to solidify a logic of solidarity embedded in food sovereignty discourse that stands in contrast to market logic. The last sentence, written in a moralistic voice (“For the sake of food sovereignty”), portrays the idea of food sovereignty as an increasingly international demand. Gaining international status, the discourse amplifies and legitimizes a collective insistence by many subaltern groups to remove food items and agricultural products from WTO guidelines altogether.

THE CONFÉDÉRATION PAYSANNE’S POLITICAL STATUS TODAY

It is a precarious endeavor to determine the relative success or failure of an organization at any given time in history. Each year presents a new set of economic and political challenges and opportunities. The union reached its highest level of measurable success in 2003 by winning 28 percent of the seats in the chamber of agriculture. But by 2011, that number came back down to 20 percent. It had returned to the same percentage as in 1997, when I first encountered the Confédération Paysanne. But as this story illustrates, questions of success and failures are complex and contradictory in any social movement. While the number of seats won in the chamber of agriculture is significant, there are so many other factors at play that shape the societal effects of the Confédération Paysanne in France and internationally.

Benoir Grenart has been a key salarier at the union for more than fifteen years. According to Grenart, the union is currently trying to maintain political ground during a period when France is led by a right-wing president: “It
isn’t easy [c’est pas évident] to do this when the president has a strong neoliberal vision. This isn’t good for the country and its agricultural system” (personal communication, January 19, 2011). Grenart commented on Bové’s ongoing commitment to the union through his work on Roquefort producers’ rights and supporting the Faucheurs Volontaires: “As Bové no longer holds a central official title in the union, he is now simply a vital and active member.” According to Grenart, since Nérac there have been divergent views among union members about Bové’s tactics and objectives: “While many support Bové, happy with his efforts to establish the union as a site for serious economic change, others are critical of Bové’s vision.” As Grenart suggests, “Many see the Conf. as a vehicle for reforming or improving agricultural systems within a social democracy — not for dramatically transforming social democracy itself.” Yet, he adds, “Bové is tremendously valued at the Conf. He’s given so much to strengthen it, to really see where it could go — even if there have been real limits constraining what the Conf. could ultimately do within the system.”

Today, the union is still vigorous and optimistic, yet struggling. It is not alone, as many progressive organizations struggle in an era of increasing neoliberalism. “What can you do?” said Sophie T., a union paysan who has worked for decades to further the cause: “You have to be optimistic. If you’re not, well, then, that’s not very helpful to others, is it? My optimism is solidarity. It’s in solidarity with those who have even less than we do that we continue the struggle. And things always change. Who would have thought, in 1997, that the WTO would be seen as a failure? Or that GMOS would be still banned? Or that we’d have gotten where we are now? We have a name that’s respected. I would never have thought all this could happen” (personal communication, February 11, 2010).

On the union’s website, an invitation went out to paysans and supporters to participate in three days of debate, “L’avenir des paysans et des aliments que nous désirons” (The future of paysans and the food we desire). From June 29 to July 1, 2011, demonstrators were asked to meet directly next to the Assemblée Nationale (French National Assembly) in Paris. Established during the French Revolution, the Assemblée Nationale constitutes one of two houses of the parliament (the other house being the Senate). The Assemblée Nationale is currently reexamining the Loi de Modernization Agricole (Law of Agricultural Modernization). According to the union, the law restructures “a model of agriculture that leads to the further disappearance of paysans.”
The union’s call for direct action says, “The disengagement of a state that replaces solidarity for profit-driven private insurance . . . signal[s] an end to a model of agriculture grounded in sound public policy. . . . For three days, paysans will demand an end to neoliberalism dictated by the WTO. From this day onward, let us create a project based on the right to food sovereignty” (my translation). For three days, paysans from throughout the country brought their protest to Paris. In doing so, the union hoped to show France, Europe, and the world that they will continue to pursue a logic of solidarity in domains of food and life itself.

Conclusion

The postindustrial condition gave rise to new sets of civil society actors seeking a logic to guide society. The willingness among much of the French populace to accept Bové as a national hero speaks to a societal desire for original forms and expressions of social solidarity. It also reflects a growing popular critique of a mode of capitalist production that looks at life, food, and humanity through an instrumental lens.

During the early 2000s, Bové and the union drew positive media coverage and political support, transforming arrests, trials, and sentences into arenas to further elaborate a collective alter-globalization message. In a post-Seattle era, Bové went beyond the ordinary role of activist paysan as he embraced an increasingly differentiated set of postindustrial issues. By focusing on global problems such as the privatization of water, electricity, and other services, Bové addressed issues well outside the realm of agriculture. He even countered neoliberal dimensions of the proposed European constitution. In addition to his participation in direct action, Bové’s presidential run and his election to the European parliament signal his commitment to continuing the struggle by appealing to policymaking political bodies.

Bové and the union built upon the Larzac tradition to create new organizations such as the Faucheurs Volontaires and Amies de la Confédération Paysanne. As in the Larzac, these organizations brought together actors from both within and outside the farming world to use nonviolent strategies in a shared struggle for an antineoliberal cause. Bové drew upon the national media mightily, attempting to bring awareness to problems associated with neoliberal politics as they grew in prominence toward the end of the decade. A hunger strike, a run for the presidency, and becoming part of the European
parliament allowed Bové to keep questions of GMOs and neoliberalism in the popular consciousness.

Since 1999, the Confédération Paysanne has successfully disrupted hegemonic postindustrial discourses on food that often normalize neoliberal industrial agricultural systems of food production. In addition to popularizing the incalculable and cultural- and quality-based term *la malbouffe*, the union has worked to promote discourses on food sovereignty. Unlike discourses on food sustainability and organics, food sovereignty discourse pushes discussions beyond critiques of production methods associated with food quality and safety. In contrast, food sovereignty discourse posits food as a political and cultural human right; food becomes something of great value that cannot be traded away through global markets.

Both the WTO and the Confédération Paysanne have taken a hit during the last few years. Yet both institutions remain standing, so the tale continues. Less powerful sets of actors impact powerful institutions, disrupting hegemonic notions of science, agriculture, and life itself. By staying the course, and articulating a consistent message of solidarity, the Confédération Paysanne has not only managed to survive for more than twenty years; it has flourished, striving to make the world and its inhabitants a little less instrumental and a little more solidaire.