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*Roquefort vs Big Mac:
Globalization and Its Others*

ON A SEASONALLY sunny day in August 1999 three hundred people turned up for a rally in a small town in southwestern France. As planned by the local Roquefort producers and the Farmers' Confederation, they slowly dismantled the flimsy structure of a McDonald's that was being built in Millau. The locals were cheering, the children had a good time, and a few local policemen were watching them peacefully. Then people went home. They did not know that what they had done would become an exemplary instance of antiglobalization struggle. From the next day their act was presented to media-users worldwide as a battle between the friends and enemies of globalization. On June 30, 2000, an estimated hundred thousand people gathered in support of the protesters during their trial in Millau. José Bové, their leader, instantaneously became a hero on a global scale. He has been celebrated as 'the most mediatized adversary of bad food and globalization'. He gave an interview on CBS's *Sixty Minutes*, was listed among the fifty new stars of Europe by *Business Week*, was followed by two CIA-agents during his subsequent travels in the U.S.A., and it was rumored that he would stand for President. He rose from southwestern France as the hero of the antiglobalization movement, spoke before a sympathetic crowd in downtown Seattle, barely escaped deportation in Porto Alegre, exchanged pipes with subcommandante Marcos in Chiapas, and published a long interview in *New Left Review* (1). With a fellow farmer and activist, François Dufour, he wrote a practical and theoretical guide to his movement entitled *The World is Not for Sale: Farmers Against Junk Food*—a bestseller almost immediately translated into English (2). After co-authoring two more books in French, in 2002 Bové came out with his

(1) José Bové, 'A Farmers' International', *NLR* 11/12, November-December 2001, pp. 89-101.

(2) José Bové & François Dufour, inter-

viewed by Gilles Luneau; translated by Anna de Casparis, *The World is Not for Sale: Farmers Against Junk Food* (London, Verso, 2001).

five-hundred-page *Paysan du monde* (3)—a personal account of how one can be a farmer and a global activist, and a reiteration of his main ideas in light of the recent strengthening of antiglobalizationist voices. Bové's movement has also become a force to be reckoned with in French politics. At the Agricultural Expo that opened in Paris in February 2002, most campaigning politicians made sure to stop at the stand of the Farmers' Confederation and shake hands with Bové. In the televised presidential debate he was asked to pose a question to the candidates. His and the Farmers' Confederation's popularity suddenly brought into light decades of work for sustainable agriculture by Bové and his fellow farmers in Larzac, as well as severe criticism of globalization by ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions in Aid of Citizens) and other organizations. The former's worldwide initiative for the first global tax, the Tobin tax, has since received much publicity and been widely debated in the American Congress and European parliaments. We have come a long way since the early 1990s when extreme right politicians of the world united in pointing at 'globalization' as the new enemy of all nations, and in many places practically expropriated political discourse critical of the process.

But it all started in Larzac. Why did the dismantling of a McDonald's have this unusual resonance among citizens in France and worldwide? A journalist of *Le Nouvel Observateur* captured the events in the symbolism of Roquefort versus Big Mac. The business section of *The New York Times* kept the semantic structure of the opposing items but gave a shrewd and seductively simple reading of Bové's act and the ensuing social movement. The grand battle of Roquefort vs Big Mac was merely a trade war prompted by the U.S. government's decision to impose a 100% import tax on certain French agricultural products, including Roquefort cheese, in retaliation for the EU's ban on hormone-treated U.S. beef. Your cheese for our beef. Such understanding suggests a substantive equivalence between Roquefort and beef that is mapped in turn on the opposition of France and the U.S., portraying the two states as if they were individuals with a legal dispute. There is clearly more to this dispute than a simple, controlled trade war between two substantively identical commodities with an equal legal standing. It is precisely the *taste differential* of the two products that is at the core of the controversy.

Examining that taste differential is my point of departure in disentangling the multiple implications of globalization and its purported enemies. What does it take to produce Roquefort? It takes, at minimum,

(3) José Bové, in collaboration with Gilles Luneau, *Paysan du monde* (Paris, Fayard, 2002).

artisanal knowledge and skills; one does not become a Roquefort producer overnight. Then the cheese requires at least 90 days to ripen in the special caves of the region where with delicate guidance nature accomplishes its task. Cooking a burger and making a Mac, a demonstrator pointed out, takes exactly 43 seconds anywhere in the world, and it can be learnt in a few hours. Big Mac, of course, means more than a hamburger per se. Big Mac is junk food, fast-and mass-produced, and made of American hormone-treated beef. The latter is a privileged meaning of Big Mac in France, notwithstanding the fact that, as it has been pointed out many times, the polysemously named company, McDonald's France, relies on homegrown produce. Big Mac stands for standardized multinational corporate products even if they are put out by a large number of independent, locally owned small businesses linked to the brand name by the shared technology in the loose organizational structure of a franchise. In contrast with the Big Mac's anonymity, the production of Roquefort, just like the product, carries a distinct regional and local flavor. Even its legend of origin ties Roquefort to the area of Larzac (4). Production takes place on a small scale and requires skills, time, trust, and continuity. Roquefort has a spatial fixity in contrast to the ubiquitous Big Mac. Roquefort is good food, Big Mac is not so good (*mal-bouffe*)—cheap junk. And, most important, Roquefort is 'ours' whereas Big Mac is not. Whose food is Big Mac though?

The rhetoric of the Bové movement certainly uses some modalities of the French tradition of anti-Americanism in which the French countryside, food, national agricultural heritage and the related pride have figured prominently. Richard Kuisel recounts vividly in his *Seducing the French* (5) that in a 1924 play Parisians learned how mechanized American farming threatened the pastoral idyll of the French countryside. As we know from personal experience, food is at the heart of ethnic identity. It offers a logical theme for any popular critique of 'others'—who devour cats, gobble up cabbage, stuff their face with dumplings, etc. It is rare, however, to encounter such unrestrained criticism as that of American food by a celebrated French chef from the 1930s, who claimed that it was 'doctored, thermochemical, and dreadful' and surmised that jazz bands played loudly in restaurants in order to stifle 'the cries of despair emitted by the unfortunate diners' (6). The

(4) According to the legend, a young shepherd took a rest in one of the caves of the region and was about to have his meal when a young shepherdess distracted him. The distraction lasted long; by the time he returned, the sheep-milk curds on his

bread had turned dark green and become Roquefort.

(5) Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993).

(6) Kuisel, *ibid.*: 10.

significance of the Big Mac nevertheless goes beyond the longest list of culinary complaints; it stands in the center of a passionate and all-encompassing cultural criticism. Still, such complexity of arguments and sentiments is not without precedent; Coca Cola also met an unusually vehement rejection on the part of French institutions including the Communist Party while the public accepted other American products, such as chewing gum and Reader's Digest, almost stoically, reminds us Kuisel.

At the bottom of anti-Americanism, in Kuisel's view, lay the construction of Frenchness that 'meant individualism, humanism, good taste, skepticism, and above all, *civilisation*—the very virtues denied to Americans' (7). Most of those items—individualism, humanism, skepticism and civilization—could easily be found on a similar list drafted for any nation, including the U.S. The only exception, it seems, is the absence of a preoccupation with good taste on the American side of the Atlantic. Taste is more than unique French cuisine; its centrality for national identity implies even a different notion of individualism, that of individuals crafted with *gusto*. Equally important is the undercurrent of an antimodernist critique in the rhetoric of anti-Americanism, the criticism directed against mass society, materialism, and standardization that, in a class-specific French reading, signals the demise of civilization.

The farmers of Larzac acted against this backdrop, duly exploiting the importance of food in the French national imagination and its anti-American overtones yet disentangling McDonald's from American culture and themselves from anti-Americanism in their rhetoric. This requires real finesse. In fact, they were much better at it than McDonald's France, which ran a locally produced, expensive advertising campaign in the media using overweight American men and unkempt cowboys as counterpoints to their message that French Big Macs are *made in France* according to local taste, and do not use U.S. beef. In reaction to the ad, the general secretary of the Farmers' Confederation was quick to point out that meat is not good because it is not American; the French are 'perfectly capable of making industrial beef' (8). 'It's food from nowhere, not even from a degeneration of American culture', Bové keeps emphasizing (9). And he also acts upon this. While the media keep presenting the McDonald's affair of Larzac as anti-Americanism, the Farmer's Confederation sets up a booth at the festival

(7) Kuisel, *ibid.* : 235.

(9) Bové & Dufour, *ibid.* : 55.

(8) *The New York Times*, 11 December 1999.

of American films in France, Bové takes a tour in U.S. farm country, and protests hand in hand with AFL-CIO workers in Seattle.

The attack was directed against McDonald's as a prominent symbol of junk food and anonymous globalization but the concrete target of the action is no less significant. The president of McDonald's France, who felt compelled to defend his enterprise and its underlying philosophy, is a Frenchman. He appears as a new type of entrepreneur: a straightforward, quasi-self-made man with entrepreneurial inclinations from early adolescence who became a CEO at an unusually tender age. His rise has much to do with some widely despised features of his company: its ignorance, sometimes outright disrespect of local society, its ways, and its deeply embedded institutions, culture and networks. He is a businessman with a rather simple model of the consumptive self: for him, the public's instinctive desire to eat at McDonald's is only suppressed by the cultural criticism coming from the superego. His confidence is backed by numbers, commonly understood as positive cash flow. In a catchy twist of words, he puts a virtuous spin on globalization and insists that his company is 'multilocal' rather than 'multinational.' The young CEO is of course a fierce champion of 'free choice' unlike Bové who, according to the manager of McDonald's France, claims a 'monopoly of taste' (10). This, of course, does not differentiate the CEO from the Roquefort-eaters; the latter also mention liberty, though in a somewhat different context, framed as the 'right of people to feed themselves freely' in the face of the 'imperialism' of the Big Mac.

The controversy of Roquefort and Big Mac is not about globalization and 'antiglobalization,' nor is it about global versus local institutions and agents. After all, the Roquefort-producers live, to a large extent, off globalization, too—selling cheese worth 30 million francs annually to the U.S.—and that is why the increase in U.S. tariffs harmed them so much. The difference between the two kinds of global connectedness lies in the niches Roquefort and Big Mac occupy in the political economy and in the symbolism of global production and consumption. Roquefort is small; its production assumes spatial boundedness and certain transparency. Big Mac is a factory product, its production is a black box; all we care about is the output that is inexpensive and well wrapped. The 'right of people to feed themselves' instead of being fed with Big Macs translates into the right to diversity vis-à-vis the sheer force that the simplicity and massive accessibility of the Big Mac represent. This opposition gets easily transposed into the politically loaded dichotomy between elitism and democratism. Indeed, for the average consumer who shops

(10) *The New York Times*, 15 March 2000, p. C10.

in supermarkets, Roquefort is an expensive, thus 'elite', product, and so is organic and locally produced food. The 'local' does not connote 'parochial' any more; parochialism is in effect redefined as being locked into the production and consumption of global staples such as Big Macs, Coca-Cola, popcorn, Hollywood blockbusters, and so on. Consumption of commodities with traceable origins and recognizable locality is bifurcated socially. It has become the privilege of social groups on the top and the plight of those in the subsistence pockets on the margins of society. The Roquefort-producers occupy a special position; they consume their own produce and sell it on the global market quite successfully. They demand transparency in food production, the right to 'trace food to its sources', as it is done in the making of Roquefort where each piece is identified, among other parameters, by the origin of the milk and the place of production. This is the virtue of both Roquefort and its market niche, and would be difficult to sustain on a larger scale, say, if people were to have Roquefort instead of cereals for breakfast. Its identifiable origin, however, does not make Roquefort entirely local. Roquefort, the commodity, is as much about globalization as its opponent, the Big Mac. Globalization, hence, means more than McDonaldization. It also means the global spread of Italian cappuccino-makers, the emergence of sushi-bars in strictly landlocked countries, the regular appearance of the French baguette, Chilean wine, or French Roquefort at an affordable price in middle-class households worldwide. The meaning of globalization is textured quite intricately encompassing mass and artisanal production as well as mass and high consumption. Staying with culinary metaphors, McDonaldization is but one aspect of what Salman Rushdie calls the 'chutneyfication' of the world. With the end of the spatial boundedness of national cultures and cuisines, they fuse with other 'uprooted' cultures, and the result is a mishmash, an element of which is spatially unbound American culture represented by Big Mac. It is through 'antiglobalizationist' struggles that the multiple meanings of globalization become disentangled.

Who is José Bové and what is his 'antiglobalizationism'? *Libération* says he is an oxymoron, an appealing mishmash of contradictory notions. He escapes conventional social classifications; he is a Farmer who went to university; he stands up for the region of Larzac yet he is not even from there; he insists on his daily siesta and dines with the Prime Minister; he is not wealthy, yet a globe trotter; he attends to sheep during the day and reads at night. He has a signature moustache, smokes a pipe and walks with the sheep, but he also wields a cell phone and implements what appears clearly as a global strategy of action. He is

both traditional and modern, rural and urban, *homo faber* and *homo cyber* (11). However, to call him an oxymoron would be a mistake. An oxymoron implies static concepts, irreconcilable substances. That is not how the field of the social works. A Bové-type of actor actively, consciously and creatively fuses elements of dissected social categories. He is a peasant by choice, a Larzac sheep farmer with a global agenda. But first of all, he is exciting because he is *a peasant with good taste*.

It is indeed a bold reinterpretation of social concepts that is a source of Bové's enormous success. Social reformers, revolutionaries, and intellectuals on the left in general are relieved to see this combination. It also creates some discomfort among people whom one would expect to support him with fervor. For some, Bové breeds the kind of unease that comes with phenomena that defy our usual distinctions and escape our categories. The co-presence of elements that do not fit is 'slimy', as anthropologist Mary Douglas would say, or simply strange and puzzling, thus untrustworthy. 'Who is he, anyway?' asks a participant of the *Libération* Internet Forum 'The José Bové phenomenon'. 'With a childhood in Berkeley, he is not a French peasant; he knows the world, he knows business...' Indeed, he does. Bové is global in his own way, just as the CEO of McDonald's France is. The two of them may have even sat next to each other in an airplane. For some, Bové represents one of the most popular and authentic voices of antiglobalizationism. Others disagree. The latter are not relieved to encounter a farmer with good taste. Bové's demand for 'good food'—which, in a more uncanny interpretation, transfigures as his 'monopoly of taste'—is countered with arguments for the right of everyone to choose freely, even if that means choosing a Big Mac. 'People with good taste do not go to restaurants where 'modern' junk is served. But the young of the *banlieues* do. Do they not have taste?' asks another participant of the same Internet forum.

There is indeed only a fine line between elitism and a minority's defense of good, that is, their taste. Bové's insistence on the right to diversity in food production and consumption negotiates this line quite well. But reference to good taste certainly does not figure conventionally in radical social critique. The delicate balance is kept by taking the consumption of 'good food' as a point of departure and linking it to production issues in a consumer society. While its price and distribution make Big Mac more accessible and more democratically available, Roquefort, as it is made by the Farmers' Confederation, is more 'democratic' on the production end.

(11) *Libération*, 7 July 2000.

The politics of the Farmers' Confederation is like Bové—an unsettling mishmash for some people, a fresh reconfiguration of concepts for others. It is 'an international farmers' movement without ideological tendencies' (12). The farmers claim intellectual predecessors in civil disobedience rather than in revolutionary violence. 'Martin Luther King, Thoreau and Gandhi vaccinated me against the allegedly revolutionary Marxists, Guevarists, Trotskyists, Maoists who dominated during the years when I discovered politics', confesses Bové (13). The farmers of the Confederation do not call for the abolition of private property but insist that 'its management should be controlled collectively on the level of a commune, or even a canton' (14). They are against 'monopoly', which puts them on the side of fervent believers in economic liberalism, but they oppose 'free trade' vehemently. They call for the abolition of official and hidden export subsidies in agriculture—in agreement with WTO and U.S. policies. Yet, they also advocate the right of individual countries to establish customs barriers in defense of local agricultural production—a 'protectionist' stance that is shared by most farmers' associations that otherwise pursue entirely different politics. The Farmers' Confederation is for 'fair trade' that reflects the real costs of agricultural production, which, among other things, should permit poor countries to sustain their own production instead of relying on cheap imports. They are in favor of trade regulations—in an eerie fit, some remark, with the regulatory traditions of the French state. Some of the workers were puzzled, recounts Bové, 'why we wanted rules while simultaneously calling for food sovereignty' (15). Indeed, they did not chant 'Down with WTO' in Seattle but demanded that its roles and mode of operation should be changed. In doing so, they were 'determined but non-violent' stresses Bové, the master of distinctions.

Arguments opposing globalization usually build on the implications of the differential mobility of capital and people. Although labor displays an unusual worldwide flexibility these days, 'people do not want to be uprooted' as observes Bové (16). In the constant flux of people and commodities responsibility becomes ever more elusive. Responsibility, however, does not become equally elusive for all players; it differs by social class, convertibility of one's wealth, social and cultural capital, and even by citizenship. The ethical basis of resistance to globalization is precisely this differential elusiveness of responsibility. This is what distinguishes the 'locals' from all others. 'We' stay whereas 'they' can leave at any time.

(12) Bové & Dufour, *ibid.*: 163.

(13) Bové, *ibid.*, 2002: 204.

(14) Bové & Dufour, *ibid.*: 134.

(15) Bové & Dufour, *ibid.*: 158.

(16) Bové & Dufour, *ibid.*: 27.

Due to their groundedness, agriculture and agricultural producers are fitting and effective signifiers of the 'local' in this context. Poor peasants will not leave; they do not have the means to do so, and the very little they do have is tied to the land. They always stay and remain witness to the very short memory of the promiscuity of late capitalism. This makes agriculture an excellent candidate for antiglobalizationist sentiments. Right-wing political discourses have traditionally relied on the topos of land and *patria*, and the contemporary European extreme right has revived these themes and exploited them in their new rhetoric of antiglobalizationism.

It is in this context that Bové's innovation is most visible. Bové has radically recontextualized the themes of agricultural production and peasantry with respect to globalization. In fact, his popular rhetoric mentions food first, 'the right to food that is as safe as it is good'. Food is at the core of consumption and identity. Agriculture that immediately brings out an unpleasant association with EU agricultural policies comes only second. This explains the relative success of the Farmers' Confederation in finding allies among relatively affluent and slightly alternative urban dwellers who have grown increasingly worried about their food and health after the mad cow disease and the Belgian benzodioxine crisis. The farmers exploit this anxiety; their insistence on the origin of food meets with an unusual understanding by citizens trying to trace the food chain. Bové reminds them of the limits of the industrialization of agriculture and its spatial boundedness: 'Sustainable farming is defined by a 'procedure' and an 'area'' (17). But this time it is not the right that runs with the topos of land. The issue of good food is linked with democratic claims, the right to 'transparency' in production and distribution. Bové and his followers have managed to avoid any association with previous French peasant protests in defense of French agriculture. They do not burn foreign trucks that deliver imported goose liver. They do destroy genetically modified corn produced by multinational companies—Bové's first act of public protest and the reason for his recent near expulsion from Brazil—but not because the seeds are produced by 'others' but because of the way they are produced. The action reads as a gesture of solidarity with the subsistence peasant economies of the less well-to-do part of the world whose livelihood is made increasingly impossible by the introduction of single-generation, self-destructive crops that guarantee higher returns but induce a previously unimaginable sense of dependence. As working class movements have been arguing since the mid-nineteenth century, it is possible to resist the

(17) Bové & Dufour, *ibid.*: 203.

ills of global capitalism without reverting to a nationalist code but what takes us by surprise is that this time it is a Farmers' International that makes that claim. The link between land and nation seems to have weakened. This new Farmers' International makes good use of globalization by emphasizing the universality of global forces and local connectedness. 'The strength of this global movement is that it differs from place to place' (18), states Bové mastering the dialectics of local and global. It has not one leader but many, he insists. The movement has indeed gained strength from reaching out to the Kanak engaged in the last anticolonial fight for independence, to the people of French Polynesia opposing nuclear tests in the Pacific, to Palestinian and Israeli pacifists demonstrating against the demolition of a Palestinian settlement, the peasants of Chiapas, those of Colombia who are left with coca as the only economically viable crop, or to the Indian peasants paraphrasing Gandhi and chanting 'Monsanto [the largest agrochemical corporation that has come to dominate seed production], leave India'. Solidarity can be pitted against xenophobia only from the standpoint of a political rhetoric whose explanatory framework goes beyond the local, one that can insert its criticism into a system-level analysis where the system, in the case of contemporary capitalism, happens to be global. Dissent is the most sensible thing to globalize, concludes Arundhati Roy (19) while speculating on the meaning of globalization. Bové and the Confederation have done just that. And that is precisely what has elevated them from the confines of Larzac Roquefort production.

What do they want besides globalizing dissent, of which there is plenty? As Bové recounts in his *Paysan du monde*, among their more specific demands are forgiving Third World debt, eliminating fiscal paradises and putting an end to the genetic modification of organisms. In more general terms they want to submit world trade to regulations, to 'put trade in its place', that is, after society and human rights. The globalization of the economy, they hold, is and should be followed by the globalization of civil society. It is a movement whose leaders are democratically elected officials, like Bové. They have no claim to power, they claim only rights: right to work, education, health, the preservation of the environment, sovereignty, and of course, to good and safe food. One cannot help wondering where this strategy leaves the state or any similar institution that can guarantee the rights so eloquently voiced by a global civil society, and if these demands can be made effectively without resorting to violence.

(18) Bové & Dufour, *ibid.*: 168.

(19) *The Nation*, 18 February 2002.

Being an antiglobalizationist is a difficult endeavor. Globalization has multiple meanings; one can be global in several ways—at times by consuming a Big Mac, at other times by having French Roquefort. Bové challenges globalization understood as the worldwide hegemony of market logic and counters it with an alternative vision in which, as the title of his book says, ‘the world is not for sale’. More precisely, not the *entire* world is for sale. Land has always been a fictitious commodity; as a minimalist project, Bové aspires to lift at least agricultural production from under the dominance of market logic. In a more ambitious understanding and in a Polanyian manner, he proposes the embedding of economic globalization in the globalization of civil society—a project that is viable only if done globally. The ‘antiglobalizationist’ movement also ‘has to turn itself international and in addition to traditional solidarities it has to globalize the struggle and the hope’ (20). Bové is not ‘antiglobal’ (a misnomer he himself also uses following media parlance); he is alternatively global. His is a statement that there is indeed an alternative to the popular ‘there is no alternative’ rhetoric that became the usual excuse for neoliberal economic policies and concomitantly a synonym for unhindered economic globalization. With this, Bové tapped into a general feeling of powerlessness generated by the ‘no alternative’ rhetoric on the part of the majority of people, and showed that indeed we live under globalization whose institutions we can accept and use but also shape to our liking. Bové’s alternative is believable and successful because it is a curious mixture of a Polanyian substantive logic and an economic-instrumental one that smoothly incorporates the shrewd calculation of import tax levied on Roquefort, and fully exploits the opportunities offered by the global media.

Globalization embodies the best promises and worst fears of modernity. It promises people economic and social advancement, more paths than before to escape from the constraints of oppressive communities, from local societies with a stubborn historical consciousness of social origins. Such promises are of course highly selective, but, thanks to the global media, broadly televised. Globalization also evokes old fears and extends social imagination in its projection of those fears. The fear of technology, of being uprooted, the fear of democratization and massification, the loss of depth and quality, the tyranny of the majority, fragmentation, the lack of order, the corrosion of character, mass culture and, of course, *bad taste*. The Roquefort-Big Mac controversy recasts some of the old tensions of modernity but perhaps with less of the hubris of modernist cultural and social criticism because the slogan of

(20) Bové, *ibid.*, 2002: 177.

Roquefort-eaters—‘the right to good food and good taste’—takes *taste* back to its original meaning.

The knowledge and experience that ‘all that is solid melts into air’ have been with us since the advent of modernity. We have also learnt that this is not the end of solidity; capital and people still need spatial fixes. The Roquefort-Big Mac controversy is, however, another reminder that those spatial fixes are becoming even less solid. There may be no time or commitment for long-term projects, such as letting the Roquefort ripen for 90 days. Bové insists nevertheless.