

JOSÉ BOVÉ

A FARMERS' INTERNATIONAL?

What was your formation as an activist in France—were you too young to participate in 1968?

I WAS THEN IN MY first years of secondary school, outside Paris, but of course I was affected by what was going on—the May events, the discussions, the whole atmosphere. I didn't do much, apart from an occupation of the school football pitch. It was in the last years at school that I started going on demonstrations. When I was 17 I got involved in the struggle against military service—for the rights of conscientious objectors and deserters. There was a network of groups throughout France. We used to attend the military tribunals every week to offer support for the boys doing military service—and for the regular soldiers, put on trial for stealing or getting into conflict with an officer. We collected all the statistics and publicized what was really going on inside the army. In 1970, 71, I moved to Bordeaux with my parents, just after the baccalauréat. I had been born there, but my parents—agricultural researchers, who worked on the diseases of fruit trees—moved round quite a lot. We spent a few years in Berkeley when I was a child.

I could have gone to university in Bordeaux, but I wanted to work full-time with the conscientious objectors. It was then, in the early 70s, that the peasants of the Larzac plateau got in touch with us. The Army had decided to expand the military base there—from 3,000 hectares to 17,000. The local farmers asked for our support in setting up resistance groups. We built up a network of over 200 Larzac committees in France; there were some in Germany and Britain, too. All new construction on the plateau had been forbidden so, in 1973, we started building a sheep

barn there, right in the middle of the zone that the Army had earmarked. Hundreds, even thousands came to help—we called it a *manifestation en dur*: a concrete demonstration. We built it completely in stone, in the traditional way. It took nearly two years. At the same time, our network was in touch with a mountain farmers' group in the Pyrenees. We used to take military-service objectors to work up there, on land that's too steep and mountainous for machinery—everything has to be done by hand. That was where I had my first experience of dairy farming and cheese-making. Then, in the winter of 75–76, the Larzac farmers decided we should squat the empty farms that the Army had bought up around the base. I moved into Montredon, as a sheep farmer—with many close contacts in the region.

What were the main influences on you at that stage?

There were two strands. One was the libertarian thinking of the time—anarcho-syndicalist ideas, in particular: Bakunin, Kropotkin, Proudhon, the anarchists of the Spanish Civil War. There were still a lot of Civil War veterans living in Bordeaux, and we used to have discussions with them. The other was the example of people involved in non-violent action strategies: Luther King and the civil rights movement in the States; César Chávez, the Mexican farm-worker who organized the Latino grape-pickers in California. There was a strong Gandhian influence, too: the idea that you can't change the world without making changes in your own life; the attempt to integrate powerful symbolic actions into forms of mass struggle.

In much of Europe and the United States, there was a clear rupture between the struggles of the sixties and seventies and those of today, with big defeats—Reagan, Thatcher—lying in between. In the States, in particular, there seems to be a new generation involved now in the anti-globalization protests. In France, there has perhaps been less sense of a clear-cut defeat, but less generational renewal, too?

The seventies were years of powerful militancy in France, coinciding with a political situation in which there was a possibility of the Left parties taking office for the first time. There was a lot of hope in 1981, when Mitterrand was elected. The ebb came in the eighties. Some people argued, 'We mustn't do anything that would damage the Socialists'. Others were disillusioned and quit politics, saying: 'We thought this

would change things, but nothing has changed'. They were the years of commercialization, of individual solutions, when cash was all-important. We weren't affected by that so much in the peasants' movement. On the Larzac plateau, after our victory against the army in 81, we started organizing for self-management of the land, bringing in young people to farm, taking up the question of Roquefort and intensive farming, fighting for the rights of small producers, building up the trade-union networks that eventually came together in the Confédération Paysanne. So for us, the eighties were very rich years. There was no feeling of a downturn.

As for the young generation: it's true that many of the campaigns of the nineties were a bit drab. They made their point, but they did not draw many people in. It was the emergence of another set of issues—the housing struggles of the homeless, the campaigns of the *sans-papiers*—that began to create new forms of political activity, crystallizing in the anti-globalization movement of the last few years. At the trial over dismantling the McDonald's in Millau in June 2000, we had over 100,000 supporters, lots of them young people. Since then, in Nice, Prague, Genoa, there has been a real sense of a different sort of consciousness. It comes from a more global way of thinking about the world, where the old forms of struggle—in the workplace or against the state—no longer carry the same weight. With the movement against a monolithic world-economic system, people can once again see the enemy more clearly. That had been a problem in the West. It's been difficult for people to grasp concretely what the new forms of alienation involve, in an economy that has become completely autonomous from the political sphere. But at the same time—and this may be more specific to France—the anti-globalization movement here has never cut itself off from other social forces. We've always seen the struggle for the rights of immigrants and the excluded, the *sans-papiers*, the unemployed, the homeless, as part of the struggle against neoliberalism. We couldn't conceive of an anti-globalization movement that didn't fight for these rights at home.

You founded the Confédération Paysanne in 1987. What is its project?

Firstly, it's a defence of the interests of peasants as workers. We're exploited, too—by the banks, by the companies who buy our produce, by the firms who sell us equipment, fertilizers, seeds and animal feed. Secondly, it's a struggle against the whole intensive-farming system. The goals of the multinationals who run it are minimum employment and

maximum, export-oriented production—with no regard for the environment or food quality. Take the calf-rearing system. First the young calf is separated from its mother. Then it's fed on milk that's been machine-extracted, transported to a factory, pasteurized, de-creamed, dried, reconstituted, packaged and then, finally, re-transported to the farms—with huge subsidies from the EU to ensure that the processed milk actually works out cheaper than the stuff the calves could have suckled for themselves. It's this sort of economic and ecological madness, together with the health risks that intensive farming involves, that have given the impetus to an alternative approach.

The Right has always tried to control and exploit the farmers' movement in Europe, in accordance with its own conservative, religious aims. The agricultural policy of the traditional Left was catastrophic, completely opposed to the world of the peasants in whose name it spoke. We wanted to outline a farming strategy—autonomous of the political parties—that expressed the farmers' own demands rather than instrumentalizing them for other ends. We're committed to developing forms of sustainable agriculture, which respect the need for environmental protection, for healthy food, for labour rights. Any farmer can join the Confédération Paysanne. It's not limited to those using organic methods or working a certain acreage. You just have to adhere to the basic project. There are around 40,000 members now. In the Chambres d'Agriculture elections this year we won 28 per cent of the vote overall—and much more in some *départements*. It was 44 per cent in Aveyron, and 46 per cent in La Manche.

How did this come to pit you against the junk-food industry—most famously, dismantling the McDonald's in Millau?

During the eighties we built up a big campaign in France against the pressures on veal farmers to feed growth hormones to their calves. There was a strong boycott movement, and a lot of publicity about the health risks. Successive Ministers of Agriculture were forced to impose restrictions, despite heavy lobbying from the pharmaceutical industry. At the end of the eighties the EU banned their use in livestock-rearing, but it has been wriggling about on the question ever since. In 1996, the US submitted a complaint to the WTO about Europe's refusal to import American hormone-treated beef—exploiting the results of a scientific conference, organized by EU Commissioner Franz Fischler, that had concluded, scandalously, that five of the hormones were perfectly

safe. But there was so much popular opposition, linked to people's growing anxieties about what was happening in the food chain—mad cow disease, Belgian chickens poisoned with benzodioxin, salmonella scares, GMOs—that the European Parliament actually held firm. When the WTO deadline expired in the summer of 1999, the US slapped a retaliatory 100 per cent surcharge on a long list of European products—Roquefort cheese among them. This was a huge question locally—not just for the sheep's milk producers, but for the whole Larzac region.

When we said we would protest by dismantling the half-built McDonald's in our town, everyone understood why—the symbolism was so strong. It was for proper food against *malbouffe*, agricultural workers against multinationals. The actual structure was incredibly flimsy. We piled the door-frames and partitions on to our tractor trailers and drove them through the town. The extreme Right and other nationalists tried to make out it was anti-Americanism, but the vast majority understood it was no such thing. It was a protest against a form of food production that wants to dominate the world. I saw the international support for us building up, after my arrest, watching TV in prison. Lots of American farmers and environmentalists sent in cheques.

How have you coordinated international solidarity with peasants and farmers in other lands?

From the early eighties, we started thinking about organizing on a European level. We felt we shouldn't stay on our own in France when there were other farmers' networks in Switzerland, Austria, Germany. We needed a common structure in the face of European agricultural policy, which is completely dominated by the interests of agribusiness. That was why we decided to set up the Coordination Paysanne Européenne, with its office in Brussels. It was through this movement that we got in contact with peasants' groups in other continents. It was about ten years ago that the idea of setting up an international structure was born. This was Via Campesina. There are many different peasants' organizations involved: the Karnataka State Farmers' Association from South India, which has played a big role in militant direct-action campaigns against GM seeds—they represent some 10 million farmers; the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil, who lead land occupations by peasant families, and have an important social and educational programme. There are regional networks in

every continent, organizing around their own objectives—Europe, North America, Central and South America, Asia and Africa. And then there is an overall coordinating executive which is based in Honduras at the moment, but will be moving to Asia next year.

You went to Seattle with Via Campesina. What was your critique of the WTO?

It was a big victory for agribusiness when food and agriculture were brought into the GATT process in 1986: a huge step towards regulating agricultural trade and production along neoliberal lines. Countries were no longer free to adopt their own food policies. They were obliged to lower tariffs and take a percentage of imports—which means, effectively, US and EU products: 80 per cent of world food exports come from these two. The process was taken further with the 1994 Marrakesh agreement that set up the WTO. Now a state can only refuse to import agricultural or food produce on the grounds of protecting the health of its population and livestock. The threat to these is determined by the Codex Alimentarius, which is in turn run by the food giants: 60 per cent of its delegates are from the EU and US.

The Marrakesh accords were supposed to be subject to a balance sheet at Seattle—of course, this never came. Not that we need an official report to know that the countries of the South have been the biggest losers: opening their borders has invited a direct attack on the subsistence agriculture there. For example, South Korea and the Philippines used to be self-sufficient in rice production. Now they're compelled to import lower-grade rice at a cheaper price than the local crops, decimating their own paddy production. India and Pakistan are being forced to import textile fibres, which is having a devastating effect on small cotton farmers. In Brazil—a major agricultural exporter—a growing percentage of the population is suffering from actual malnutrition. The multinationals are taking over, denying large numbers of farming families access to the land and the possibility of feeding themselves.

What were your demands at Seattle?

Firstly, all countries should have the right to impose their own tariffs, to protect their own farming and food resources and maintain a balance between town and countryside. People have a fundamental right to produce the food they need in the area where they live. That

means opposing the current relocation of American and European agribusiness—chicken and pig farms, and greenhouse vegetables—to countries with cheap labour and no environmental regulation. These firms don't feed the local people: on the contrary, they destroy the local agriculture, forcing small peasant-farming families off the land, as in Brazil. Secondly, we have to take measures to end the multinationals' dumping practice. It's a well-established tactic used to sweep a local agriculture out of the way. They flood a country with very cheap, poor-quality produce, subsidized by massive handouts in export aid and other help from big financial interests. Then they raise prices again, once the small farmers have been destroyed. In sub-Saharan Africa, livestock herds have been halved as a result of the big European meat companies flooding in heavily subsidized frozen carcasses. The abolition of all export aid would be a first step towards fair trading. The world market would then reflect the real cost of production for the exporting countries.

Thirdly, we absolutely refuse the right of the multinationals to impose patents on living things. It's bio-piracy, the grossest form of expropriation on the planet. Patents are supposed to protect a new invention or a new technique, not a natural resource. Here, it's not even the technique but the products, the genetically modified seeds themselves, that are 'patented' by half-a-dozen chemical companies, violating farmers' universally recognized right to gather seed for the next year's harvest. The multinationals' GM programme has also been a ferocious attack on biodiversity. For instance, something like 140,000 types of rice have been cultivated in Asia, over the centuries. They've been adapted to particular local tastes and growing conditions—long-grain, short-grain, variations in height, taste, texture, tolerance of humidity and temperatures, and so on. The food companies are working on five or six strains, genetically modified for intensive, low-labour cultivation, and imposing them in areas of traditional subsistence farming. In some Asian countries—the Philippines and China are the worst cases—these half-dozen varieties now cover two-thirds of rice-growing land.

What would be your alternative to the WTO?

We've argued for an International Trade Tribunal—in parallel to the International Court of Human Rights—with a Charter, and judges nominated by the UN. There should be transparency of action, and private individuals, groups and trade unions should be able to bring cases, as

well as states. The Tribunal would play a constitutional role, advising on whether international economic accords should be ratified: they would have to concur with the individual and collective rights to which UN members are signatories—the right to food, to shelter, to work, education, health. These rights need to be imposed upon the market; they should be respected not just by states but by economic institutions. It's a similar process to that of the Kyoto accords on the environment.

Kyoto surely doesn't offer a very powerful precedent?

I agree. But these things take time. The call for an International War Crimes Tribunal has now been ratified by 30 or 40 countries, although it's taken almost four decades. But it's essential to ask what structures we do want, for multilateral trade. We have to develop a long-term global vision, without being naïve. That will require a certain balance of forces.

Others in Via Campesina—the MST, for instance—have called for the abolition of the WTO, rather than its reform. Are the experiences of North and South at odds here?

'Food out of the WTO' is Via Campesina's demand. We're all agreed on the three main points—food sovereignty, food safety, patenting. For the people of the South, food sovereignty means the right to protect themselves against imports. For us, it means fighting against export aid and against intensive farming. There's no contradiction there at all. We can stage an action in one part of the world without in any way jeopardizing the interests of the peasants elsewhere, whether it's uprooting genetically modified soya plants with the Landless Movement in Brazil, as we did last January, or demonstrating with the Indian farmers in Bangalore, or pulling up GM rice with them when they came to France, or protesting with the peasants and the Zapatistas in Mexico—effectively, our demands are the same. Of course there are different points of view in Via Campesina—it's the exchange of opinions and experiences that makes it such a fantastic network for training and debate. It's a real farmers' International, a living example of a new relationship between North and South.

Shouldn't the anti-globalization movement oppose globalized forms of military power—NATO, for example, as well as the WTO?

That's more complicated. It's not to say that one shouldn't fight against NATO. But behind the military conflict there is often a far more cunning and destructive form of economic colonization going on, through the programmes imposed by the IMF and World Bank—opening regions up to the multinationals, dismantling public services, privatizing utilities. In Sarajevo in the mid-nineties, for instance, there were people in the French military contingent who weren't officers at all but representatives of the multinational, Vivendi—originally Eaux de France. They spent their whole time studying the water mains and the infrastructure. When the fighting was over, they were on the spot to offer their services in reconstructing Bosnia's utilities. Today, it's Vivendi that runs Sarajevo's water system, as a private service. It's a form of economic domination that we're seeing throughout Latin America, Africa, Asia and elsewhere.

We do need to denounce the role of the sole military superpower as world policeman. But its economic dominance is more important. There tend to be anti-war protests against particular conflicts, rather than around militarism as such. There was quite a big mobilization in France against the Gulf War, although it wasn't easy since it was a Socialist government that was prosecuting the War. But the way the West struck simply in order to control the oil was so brazen that it did generate real protest. In Bosnia and Kosovo, the situation was much more ambiguous. There was a lot of debate inside the movement between those who opposed the NATO intervention and others who said, quite rightly, that Milošević's regime was a rotten, red-brown affair—the old Stalinism in Serb national dress. And people had known what was going on in Kosovo for years. There was a lot of discussion as to what form resistance and solidarity should take. But for me, there can never be a good war. As soon as you reach that stage, it is inevitably the people who lose. I was against both forms of military intervention, as I oppose the American bombardment of Afghanistan.

What is your attitude to the anti-globalization 'republicanism' of Chevènement, which has had its reflections in Left thinking elsewhere: Benn in Britain, for example?

I had a public debate with Chevènement on French radio when I was at the anti-globalization conference at Porto Alegre last January. It came down to an opposition of two completely different points of view. Chevènement thinks that the borders of the nation-state can serve as a rampart against

globalization. I believe that's an illusion. Multinational corporations, multilateral accords on investment, free-trade rules operate on quite another level, over and above national frontiers. To say one can have a strong state makes no sense in this context. It just gives people the mirage of a satisfactory form of protection. As Interior Minister, Chevènement was responsible for implementing the most restrictive immigration policies, abrogating the basic human right to freedom of movement. Closing the frontiers does nothing to resolve the fundamental issue at stake in immigration—the inequality between North and South.

Surely the one state whose power hasn't lessened in the face of these multilateral accords is the USA?

Of course the US completely dominates the IMF and the World Bank, and its will is hegemonic within the Security Council. But the US government, in turn, is just a tool of the big companies. Its political function is simply to relay the economic interests of the major firms—which is why, in the last elections, many people didn't see any choice between Bush and Gore. Ralph Nader's campaign highlighted the real nature of American politics. Candidates are effectively elected to be the representatives of financial or industrial groups. The system is entirely at the service of economic interests, which retain the real power. One can see this happening in detailed ways at the level of the federal administration: the power of the multinationals imposes itself directly on the running of the machine. The US state functions as a motor of support for them, institutionally and ideologically. But neoliberalism is not just an American preserve. It goes right across the board—Europe or America, governments of the Right or Social Democrats. In their negotiations with the WTO, there has been no difference between the current EU commissioner for trade—Pascal Lamy, a member of the French Socialist Party—and his predecessor Leon Brittain, a British Conservative. The same thinking—*la pensée unique*—really is hegemonic everywhere today. It's not just *la pensée américaine*. We need to pay attention to its proponents within our own countries, rather than see only the Stars and Stripes.

Jospin came to power promising a more radical agenda than either Blair or Schroeder—what's the balance sheet?

There is scarcely any difference between the economic programmes of the Right and Left—if one can call the Socialist Party that. For example, there's been no attempt at a genuine reduction of the working week, just a series of negotiations within each sector. They're trying to take a middle path. They could have gone much further. Now, with their eyes on next year's elections, the PS have been trying to recover votes on the Left by making a show of interest in the autonomous movements. But it's just at the level of talk. They're doing nothing about the movements' programmes at the level of policy. At the WTO talks in Doha the French government will be right behind the EU positions. The main question in the legislative and presidential elections next spring will be the percentage of abstentions. A lot of people have been very disappointed in the policies of the Union of the Left—and they don't necessarily recognize themselves in the hard-left candidates, who will get a few votes in the first round. Chirac and Jospin offer no real choice between alternatives. Their vision of society is the same. We're moving increasingly towards a situation where economic logic is stronger than any political will. Party leaders simply adjust to the prevailing wind. The Confédération Paysanne is not calling for a vote for any of the parties. I myself wonder whether one should vote at all.

There has been talk of your standing in the presidential election yourself?

Never. That's not my role. In fact, it's a condition of membership of the Confédération Paysanne that you cannot stand in an election. Curiously enough, the first person who said I was thinking of standing in the presidentials was Daniel Cohn-Bendit, just after Seattle. A few days later the Socialist Party repeated it—as if the aim was to break the social movement by saying: they do all this just to serve as a trampoline towards a political party, or to enter office. As if one couldn't have an autonomous movement with a logic of its own, acting as an oppositional force outside the established political domain. I would never see it as my role to act like the leader of a political party, as a professional representative who takes responsibility out of other people's hands. The aim of a social movement or a union like ours is to enable people to act for themselves. The economy has become an autonomous sphere today, imposing laws of its own. If we are going to create a new politics we have to understand this.

You went to the Israeli-occupied territories this summer, to demonstrate with the Palestinian farmers. What did you learn about the situation there?

First of all, I experienced the reality of the Israeli military occupation of Palestine—that it really is a war of colonization. They're trying to impose an apartheid system on both the occupied territories and the Arab population in the rest of Israel. They are also putting in place—with the support of the World Bank—a series of neoliberal measures intended to integrate the Middle East into globalized production circuits, through the exploitation of cheap Palestinian labour. Along the frontier with the occupied territories, they're setting up the same sort of enterprise system you see along the Mexican–US border. So there is a very acute economic dimension to the conflict. The UN resolutions need to be implemented. But there also needs to be a radical reorientation at the economic level, that would offer a viable future to the Palestinians.

The financial press has been triumphantly announcing that September 11 has put paid to the anti-globalization movement. What is your assessment—did the terrorist attacks in the US 'change everything'?

Underneath, nothing has changed. The world situation remains the same. The institutions are unchanged. And the anti-globalization movements, too, are still here. With the bombardment of Afghanistan, we are seeing the domestic propaganda needs of the United States being elevated to war aims, inflicting revenge on an innocent people already suffering miseries of deprivation, while threatening further destabilization in that part of the world. There is also no doubt that the US wants access to oil wells outside the control of OPEC, and may have its eye on reserves in the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia. The position of the Confédération Paysanne has been: 'No to Taliban, No to Terrorism, No to War'.

We also see a new awareness, born of the economic crisis, of the need for regulation and public intervention. In that sense, the logic of globalization is more on the defensive now. The critique of neoliberalism that we have been developing over the last years is more valid than ever after September 11. But the response of most of the states who've signed up for what they call the 'war against terrorism' is to call for an expansion of neoliberal policies, as if that could resolve the inequalities between different countries, or social layers. They have understood

nothing. September 11 should have been a chance to take stock of the sort of social and ideological costs this regime has been exacting, and to call for its radical reform. Instead, they are seeking to reinforce their global domination, escalating the dangers of wider international conflict. As neoliberalism increases the balance of misery in the world, it just augments the numbers of those desperate enough to throw themselves into fanatical, suicidal attacks against it.

Previous texts in this series have been Naomi Klein, 'Reclaiming the Commons' (NLR 9), Subcomandante Marcos, 'The Punch Card and the Hourglass' (NLR 9) and John Sellers, 'Raising a Ruckus' (NLR 10).

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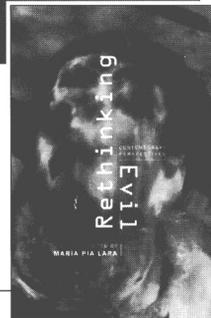
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