

The French Exception

Sophie Meunier

JUST SAY NON

THE BIGGEST CELEBRITY in France last year was neither an entrepreneur, nor a sports figure, nor even an entertainment personality. It was the sheep farmer José Bové, whose claim to fame was his destruction of a French McDonald's last August. He followed that with a triumphant trip to the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO), bringing along 400 pounds of smuggled Roquefort cheese. Bové's protests against American-style globalization and U.S. trade retaliation against European products resonated strongly with the French public and politicians of all stripes. Indeed, in a nearly unanimous show of national support, France is now taking the international lead in the outcry against globalization.

Some might find it paradoxical that one of Europe's most successful economies would attack globalization so forcefully. France's unfolding conversion to market liberalism is partly a conscious effort by policymakers and partly an unintended byproduct of European integration. Despite France's *dirigiste* past, the recent wave of mergers, hostile takeovers, and shareholder capitalism has actually met general public acquiescence. Economic growth is strong, unemployment is finally going down, and the French "malaise" is now officially over. So one might expect that France would break free from the protectionist demands of traditional special-interest groups and fully embrace its globalized future. But the dominant political debate raging in France today is over how much control the nation should retain over its borders.

SOPHIE MEUNIER is Research Associate at the Center of International Studies and Lecturer at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University.

The French Exception

Intellectuals, interest groups, and even mainstream politicians have all joined the bandwagon denouncing the negative effects of globalization, homogenization, and Americanization for the sake of preserving the “French exception.”

The reason for this disjuncture is that France feels that nothing short of its national identity is at stake. Rather than being framed as a question of free trade versus protectionism, the trade debate has been recast as “Anglo-Saxon globalization” versus the preservation of France’s national and cultural values. As all of French society joins in the fight to preserve its uniqueness, this debate increasingly transcends traditional cleavages. The French movement is so strong that it is poised to take on an even greater role, affecting European integration and the international antiglobalization cause itself.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

AS IN MANY other countries, the French reaction against globalization shows that the new issues touching on trade are more contentious and domestically sensitive than ever before. When trade was only about tariffs and quotas, its politics was easy to understand—it pitted importers against exporters and consumers against producers. The argument to restrict or expand trade was an economic argument about jobs and prices. Trade policy could be manipulated to protect special interests, and when governments decided to open up certain economic sectors to international competition, these special interests could be compensated. But with each round of multilateral trade negotiations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, traditional trade barriers were reduced and new types of nontariff barriers were tackled. During the Uruguay Round, the “new issues” of services and intellectual property were added to the traditional trade agenda. Today, trade matters extend to all kinds of domestic regulatory policies, including food safety, environmental regulations, and labor laws. The potential losers from free trade are no longer special-interest groups but global causes: the environment, democracy, and human rights.

These concerns account for a large part of the French resistance to globalization. Yet it is noteworthy that antiglobalization sentiment is

much stronger in France than elsewhere, and that French politicians have felt compelled to take the international lead in the march against “Anglo-Saxon globalization.” The distinctive attributes of French society can best explain this phenomenon, especially the 1990s shift in the arguments against free trade from the economic to the political and cultural realms. The fight against the liberalization of world trade is leading the country through a strange exercise of collective introspection about what it means to be French.

Ever since World War II, French foreign policy has tried to assert the country’s special international role—usually in reaction to the United States. Under Charles de Gaulle, France tried to establish itself as the champion of a third way in international relations, often bridging the two superpower camps. Under François Mitterrand, France turned toward European integration, using the European Union’s economic might to ensure that it retained a significant world role. But the world has changed. The new American hegemony—which French leaders call “hyperpower”—has overwhelmed the Gaullist-Mitterrand approach. This debate is giving France an opportunity to find a new world role as the leader of the opposition to globalization. In doing so, France has also proclaimed itself as an advocate for the developing world. French intellectuals, pundits, and politicians readily point to the increasing inequalities between the richest and the poorest countries as a byproduct of globalization and incessantly repeat that France has a sacred duty to combat these trends in the name of the most disadvantaged on the planet—even if (as Seattle demonstrated) the developing countries themselves strongly object to rich countries dictating their social and economic development.

One well-known peculiarity of French cultural identity is its anti-Americanism, stemming partly from its humiliating reliance on American help in the two world wars and the collapse of its empire. This feeling was rekindled in 1999 as the United States retaliated against French and European products after the WTO rulings on the famous banana and beef disputes. Thanks to Bové’s deliberate attack against McDonald’s and politicians’ denunciation of “Anglo-Saxon imperialism,” the United States has become the scapegoat for all social groups hurt by globalization.

THE NEW FRENCH RESISTANCE

ABOVE ALL, globalization has been vilified because it threatens the very foundation of French greatness: France's unique culture. But the clash between French and American cultures was probably inevitable given the universalist vocation that both nations claim. This tension reemerged at the end of the Uruguay Round in 1993, when the United States and the European Union (EU) debated the issue of "cultural exception." At the time, the debate focused only on cultural goods such as movies, music, and television programming. But in recent years France's fear has grown that trade in general—not just trade in cultural goods—might threaten French culture. The WTO has been portrayed in France as a Trojan horse that forces on others the low-brow uniformity of the American lifestyle—fast food, bad clothing, and even worse sitcoms. In contrast, the French cultural model is portrayed as a "high" culture of philosophers, fine dining, and intellectual films. Indeed, one of Bové's public-relations victories was to fuse the issues of agriculture and culture. In an editorial titled "Vive le Roquefort libre!" the respectable newspaper *Le Monde* intoned that "resistance to the hegemonic pretenses of hamburgers is, above all, a cultural imperative." According to this reasoning, a Truffaut film is as much a defining component of French cultural identity as fois gras or Parisian cafés. Hence, France must protect all of its cultural treasures or none.

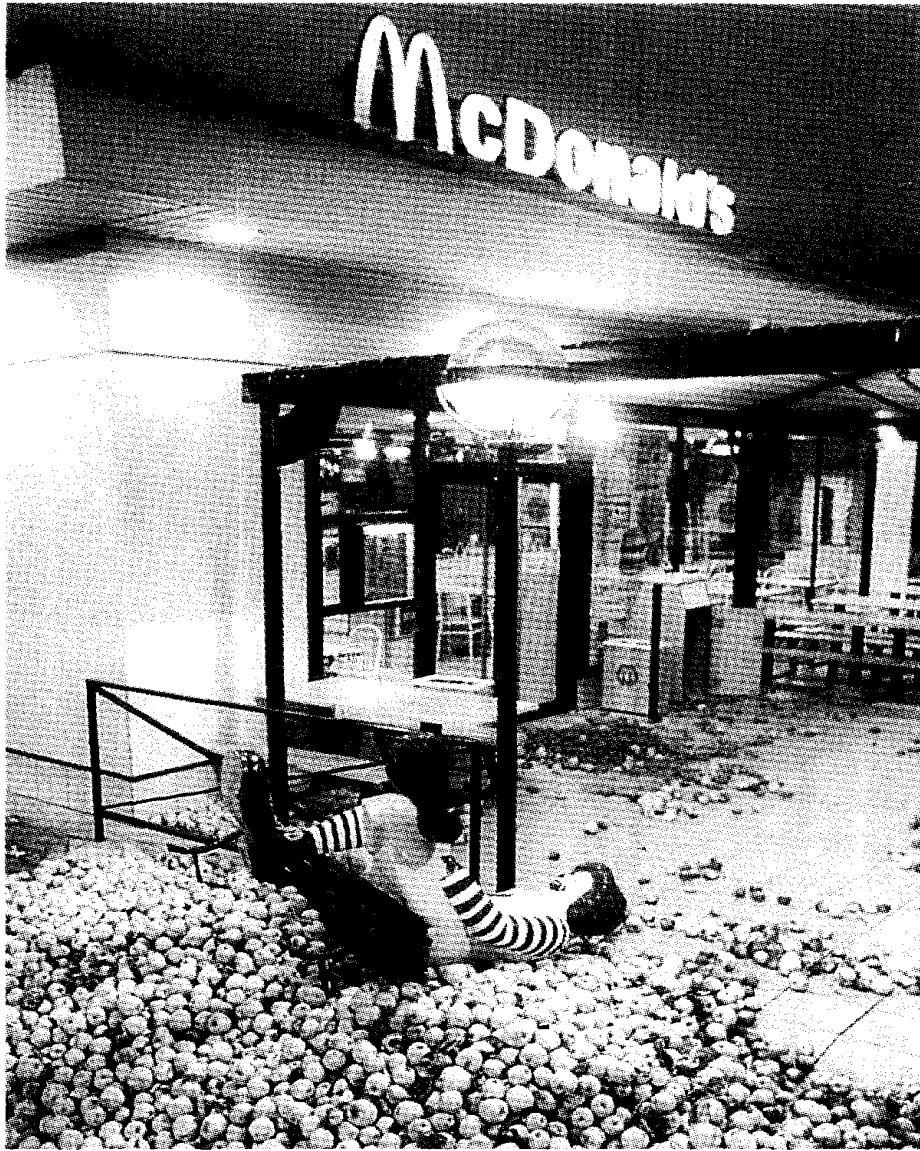
Focusing the cultural arguments on food has proven a particularly fruitful strategy for globalization's adversaries. Food is one of the most universally recognized components of French culture—and remains one of the greatest sources of domestic pride. As *Le Monde* noted, "McDonald's red and yellow ensign is the new version of America's star-spangled banner, whose commercial hegemony threatens agriculture and whose cultural hegemony insidiously ruins alimentary behavior—sacred reflections of French identity." By painting globalization as a direct attack on French food, its opponents received national approbation for a collective struggle against *la mal-bouffe*, or "lousy food." Bové and his followers threw into the same bag the issues of American trade imperialism, genetically modified food, and the fatty American nutritional model. Since nothing that French politicians say on behalf of French culinary traditions can backfire, they have now entered a free-for-all battle of wits

in which they try to outdo each other with catch phrases and solemn declarations on hamburgers. The winner in this category may be France's agriculture minister, who recently declared that the United States "has the worst food in the world" and publicly announced last August that he had never eaten at McDonald's and disliked hamburgers.

Critics also fear that globalization threatens the French language—another prominent and unifying component of French identity. In recent decades, France has tried to stop the decline of French usage in the world by promoting an aggressive policy known as "francophonie." Abroad, it meant teaching the French language, developing cultural exchange programs, and fostering Francophone cultural traditions. It also meant defending French in one of its traditional bastions: international diplomacy. At home, French language policy has sometimes gone so far as to ban certain foreign words while developing an alternative vocabulary in French. In March, for instance, the French government prohibited civil servants from using the words "e-mail" and "start-up." Instead, they must refer to "un message électronique" and "une jeune pousse"—results of months of brainstorming by specially appointed committees. This effort has also meant downplaying local dialects and regional languages. But France is losing this particular battle: spoken by 1.6 billion people on the planet, English dominates as the language of business and the Internet.

NO SURRENDER

MUCH OF French resistance to globalization stems from culture, but politics and economics also count. In fact, the recent debate really emerged in spring 1999 as a result of two WTO rulings against Europe. In one, the WTO concluded that EU preferences under the Lomé Convention for bananas from former African and Caribbean colonies were discriminatory; it let the United States impose retaliatory sanctions against certain European goods until the EU banana regime complied with world trade rules. In the other, the WTO ruled that the EU ban on U.S. hormone-treated beef was indeed protectionist as long as scientific evidence could not attest to any danger, so it allowed Washington to retaliate against European products such as Dijon mustard and Roquefort cheese until the ban was lifted.



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

*How do you like them apples?
A farmers' protest, Cavaillon, France, August 1999*

Both rulings infuriated the French. Who were WTO judges to rule that Europeans could not help their former colonies, whose economies would otherwise be destroyed if opened to international market forces? Who were WTO judges to rule that the American cattle lobby could force potentially harmful hormone-treated beef down the throats of European children? The rulings were presented in France as clear evidence that globalization puts business interests above consumer safety, international political stability, and humanitarian concerns.

But trade is only part of the story. For many French, national sovereignty is also at stake. As the anti-wto backlash revealed, globalization is charged with producing a democratic deficit, a “rape of popular will” (in the words of *Le Monde Diplomatique*). The 1992 Maastricht referendum on the EU had already demonstrated the appeal of the sovereignty theme in French public opinion. More recently, the failure of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment in 1998 and the aborted 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle gave France further opportunities to reassert what it saw as its basic democratic and sovereign principles—and teach the world a lesson.

Along with its obsession with sovereignty, French political culture has always looked to a highly centralized state for governance. The French people rely on the state for entrepreneurship, political leadership, and economic support. Globalization threatens this bulwark of French politics because it weakens the state by giving more responsibilities to private actors. Indeed, globalization consecrates American individualism and the victory of American-style democracy over French-style republicanism and *dirigisme*. In reacting against globalization, the French are reacting to the surrender of their state traditions to a foreign system of political values.

CORDON SANITAIRE

FRANCE has also embraced the international crusade against globalization for domestic political reasons. The argument here began in the 1980s, when the far-right National Front’s Jean-Marie Le Pen fretted about France’s “borders.” Le Pen won support by linking domestic economic insecurities to threats from abroad—arguing, for example, that the “invasion” of France by immigrants caused high unemployment and threatened French national identity. When the debate turned to European integration and later to globalization, the fear of immigrants easily translated into a fear of foreign goods, labor, and capital. Indeed, Le Pen himself switched his target from immigration to trade globalization in 1999 as he campaigned for the European Parliament.

Discourse on globalization has toughened since the end of the Cold War. In most democracies, capitalism’s triumph led to a narrowing of ideological differences as politicians across the spectrum embraced

the market. In France, this led first to consensus politics, the uneventful rule of *cohabitation*, and the adoption of what critics refer to as “la pensée unique”—a uniform way of thinking about economic issues. But now, instead of acknowledging the “end of ideology,” French intellectuals and politicians are entering a period of fertile ideological renewal. As a result, the political opposition has had to crystallize around a new cause: the relation between France and its borders.

Indeed, since last summer resistance to globalization has drawn support from all parts of civil society: farmers, labor groups, environmentalists, journalists, academics, and filmmakers. Even soccer players and coaches have demonstrated against the WTO and globalization to protest the advent of capitalism in sports management. Given such breadth of popular sentiment, French politicians have been forced to follow. The extremist parties have seized on the antiglobalization cause as the logical continuation of their traditional combat against free trade. And the mainstream parties have been unable to withstand the extraordinary appeal of this movement in public opinion.

Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and President Jacques Chirac, who will likely run against each other in the 2002 presidential election, are both wooing the antiglobalization movement. Paradoxically, the socialist Jospin is pursuing the most ambitious program of privatization to date while preaching the necessity of regulating trade and railing against the excesses of the market. For his part, the Gaullist Chirac thunders about France’s world role and the need for a head-to-head confrontation with the United States. This two-track attack, like Bové’s antics, is widely acclaimed. In an October 1999 poll in *L’Expansion*, 60 percent of those surveyed said that globalization directly worsened social inequalities and threatened French identity—even though 50 percent also claimed that globalization was responsible for economic growth.

Globalization’s most direct political consequence has been the implosion and recomposition of the right. For more than a decade, France had three conservative parties: the economically liberal Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF), the Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), and the xenophobic National Front. But as the

Globalization may spell the end of agricultural corporatism in France.

left increasingly adopted many of the right's traditional policies (like economic liberalism), conservatives found themselves in disarray. The right's politicians began to defect from the big parties and founded a multitude of small parties, ad hoc electoral lists, and opportunistic alliances. The global challenge now presents the big parties with an opportunity to reform along clear lines: those who accept globalization and those who do not. As a result, centrists and the UDF have finally embraced European integration and global economic liberalization. Meanwhile, globalization's opponents defected to the new "*souverainiste*" party—the Rassemblement pour la France (RPF), created by Charles Pasqua in November 1999—with the goal of protecting France's sovereignty, values, and social cohesion. This leaves the Gaullist RPR in search of an identity and a mobilizing theme. As for the National Front, its strength might dwindle further as its less extremist voters flock to the RPF until only the hard core of xenophobic supporters is left.

Globalization could also spur an ideological renewal on the left. The Socialist Party has already embraced both European integration and globalization, albeit in a harnessed and controlled form. In October 1999, the socialist *députés* recommended that the EU play a leading role in defending a "civilization model" that would respect economic, social, and cultural differences. Since then, Jospin has tried hard to distinguish himself from his European social-democrat counterparts, rejecting a Blairite "third way" of social liberalism in favor of a distinctly socialist approach to market economics. Other leftists have not been eager to embrace globalization at all. Jean-Pierre Chevènement's "Mouvement des Citoyens," for example, has developed a *souverainiste* message of the left that warns of losing national sovereignty, state centralism, and democratic accountability.

The Communist Party, meanwhile, has been ideologically galvanized. Denouncing market capitalism and American "totalitarianism" could give the Communists new adherents—or at least stop the hemorrhage of their current supporters. Other alternative parties, such as the Greens, could also profit from antimarket discontent, as could non-governmental organizations, which have traditionally been weak in French politics. New activist organizations, such as the Observatoire de la mondialisation, the Coordination pour le contrôle citoyen de l'OMC, and Attac (which counted more than 23,000 members in May)

The French Exception

have already proved themselves players to be reckoned with, as was demonstrated by the Seattle mobilization.

HOMEGROWN

ONE CRUCIAL IMPACT of globalization on French politics may well be the end of agricultural corporatism. Since World War II, French farmers have been united under the powerful Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d'Exploitants Agricoles (FNSEA), whose policy has long been to build up agricultural productivity and exports through the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the name of food self-sufficiency. The FNSEA has traditionally had direct ties to political leaders and a virtual monopoly on agricultural lobbying. The French got used to the FNSEA's protectionist ways. Whenever farmers disagreed with public policy, they took their violent protests to the streets until the government backed down. The public reluctantly went along, agreeing to pay astronomical subsidies to agriculture to preserve a rural way of life that the FNSEA pretended to defend. The FNSEA thus skillfully obtained government protection from external competition and made France the world's second-largest agricultural exporter, after the United States.

But the globalization debate is transforming the FNSEA's privileged political position. The French farmers who captured headlines in 1999 were not, for once, FNSEA supporters but members of the Confédération Paysanne (CP), a small organization with roots in the leftist movement of May 1968. The CP was created in 1987 to represent small farmers and challenge the FNSEA's industrialist agricultural policy. Bové and François Dufour, the CP's current leaders, insist on preserving the rural landscape and way of life in recognition of agriculture's "multifunctionality." The CP's actions during the summer of 1999 were therefore far different from the FNSEA's usual corporatist violence. Bové and his followers revolted against food tampering from a cultural and a public-health perspective, portraying their cause as concerning not just farmers but society as a whole. This approach has won the CP support across the political spectrum, from the Greens to the right-wing *souverainistes*. The CP's appeal will likely continue to grow as the public becomes more aware of the extent of

French agriculture's "industrialization," which has been publicized in recent food scares, and tires of the FNSEA's blackmail. If the CP establishes a durable alliance with consumers and environmentalists, it may deal a fatal blow to the FNSEA's monopoly. Since the CP advocates an end to trade-distorting export subsidies—which only reinforce the industrialized nature of French agriculture—it stands to radically transform the French position on CAP and the prospects for an international agreement on agricultural subsidies.

L'EUROPE, C'EST MOI

FINALLY, France's globalization debate has spilled over its borders to affect its relationship with Europe. The initial phase of "Europeanization" was in fact just one regional variant of globalization; the Single Market program that began in the 1980s increased economic interdependence, foreign investment, and concerns over national sovereignty. Today's debate often echoes the 1992 Maastricht referendum campaign, something that helps explain the vigor of the French protests this time around.

But if the debate over globalization has recalled the debate over Europe, it has also displaced it. Some opponents of European integration in the early 1990s are now using the EU as a buffer to control globalization. This is hardly surprising, given that European integration offers France a large market, a shared system of values embodied in institutions, and a powerful voice in international relations. Recent polls in France show rising support for European integration. About two-thirds of those polled now favor further European integration, while 73 percent said that Europeanization can fight against the ill effects of globalization. The largest increases come from traditionally Euroskeptical groups, such as women and private-sector employees. Many French politicians have followed this trend; some of Brussels' most vocal opponents now praise the virtues of the EU as France's only realistic alternative to American-led globalization. With the exception of the extremist parties and to some extent the *souverainistes*, France now has a consensus on Europe.

French concerns over preserving sovereignty will likely shape the current EU Intergovernmental Conference, which plans to reform EU

institutions to absorb new members from central and eastern Europe. Here the debate revolves around how much sovereignty should be transferred to Brussels and how much should remain the prerogative of the member states. France will probably weigh heavily toward the intergovernmental design, which would allow it greater autonomy. But this may mean a tradeoff in terms of practicality, since the requirement of consensus and the existence of veto power for all EU member states may lead to stalled decision-making. At the same time, France will push to strengthen the EU vis-à-vis America, especially in matters of foreign and security policy.

EU trade policy will also be affected. The EU has already adopted some French rhetoric against globalization, as was made clear in Seattle, when it took up some of France's pet themes: the "multifunctionality" of agriculture, the establishment of a multilateral competition policy, and food safety guarantees. Even though the EU now champions open markets and multilateral trade rules, it is trying to develop a "harnessed" and "managed" alternative to globalization. Furthermore, France's influence over Brussels' trade policy could increase now that a Frenchman, Pascal Lamy, has replaced Leon Brittan (the "ultraliberal Thatcherian dinosaur," in the words of *Le Monde Diplomatique*) as EU trade commissioner. And as France prepares to take over the rotating EU presidency in the second half of 2000, Europe will likely take an even firmer stance against U.S. trade "unilateralism."

Finally, French activism is poised to exert influence beyond Europe's borders. The opponents to globalization were so successful in Seattle precisely because they formed a coalition of diverse interests, political affiliations, and countries. The French opposition to globalization could easily find adherents worldwide. Bové claims to have more in common with small, organic farmers in Washington State than with the agro-industrial giants of the French Beauce region (which earned him FNSEA accusations of being a U.S. double agent). French intellectuals and politicians feel that they can help spread this movement. When Jospin went to Japan last December, his anti-American, antiglobalization message fell on very receptive ears. At the end of his trip, Japanese and French officials agreed to work together to craft alternatives to U.S.-imposed "global standards."

Many countries have qualms about globalization. From Latin America to East Asia, voices are raised against widening inequalities, the lack of democratic accountability, and cultural homogenization. Seattle revealed that even in the United States, numerous groups oppose opening borders to trade and investment. But France has taken the international lead here because its political and cultural identity combines all the elements threatened by globalization: a universalist culture, a language with international aspirations, a “superior” cuisine, a sensitive view of national sovereignty, a strong, centralized state, a need for a world role, a sense of duty toward the poorer nations, and a deeply rooted anti-Americanism.

One central problem faced by French adversaries of globalization is that their constructiveness is questionable. Is France amplifying a strong but empty antiglobalization rhetoric to mask the reality—i.e., that the French economy has been embracing global integration all the while? Or can the opposition actively propose concrete alternatives that might appeal to other countries as well? So far, French agitation has helped put the issue on the table while also revealing France’s internal contradictions. But some activists, like the CP, have in fact developed constructive proposals. If such groups gain ground, other countries may join the fight. France is already finding allies in Japan and Canada, two countries facing the same paradox as France: how to reap the benefits of globalization while dodging the detrimental cultural consequences of the American “steamroller.” If French politicians can join with their European partners to work out a sensible alternative to American-style globalization and find powerful allies in other countries, the French backlash will echo well beyond France’s borders. 🌐