

Chapitre 24/Chapter 24

Conférence plénière No. IV : Stratégies des mouvements sociaux/Strategies for Change : "Social Europe", Food for Thought

par Arthur Mitzman (Université d'Amsterdam)

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Summary:

This paper is concerned in general with the contribution a "Social Europe" could make to countering neoliberal globalization, and in particular with the significance of the struggle against junk food of José Bové and the Confédération Paysanne.¹ Given, of course, the post-9/11 fear of terrorism, public concern has shifted overwhelmingly from social and economic concerns to matters of security. Correspondingly, the anti-globalization movement has largely become an anti-war movement. I will argue, however, that it is the uninhibited spread of neoliberal practices that has undermined security in all spheres of life, including airline safety as well as food and employment, and that the best guarantee of a secure and peaceful world is in the linking of European unity and independence to the social and ecological goals striven for by the movements for global justice.

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In Le Monde of 29 December 2001, the page France-Société was completely devoted to resistance to the projected global hegemony of American media corporations, which, as you know, comes dressed in the principles of free trade. The "exception culturelle" claimed by both Left and Right in France since 1993 was being challenged by Jean-Marie Messier, president of Vivendi, who had asserted in New York that "the Franco-French cultural exception is dead".

Messier was supported among French politicians only by Alain Madelin, who presides over the Party for Liberal Democracy, is a disciple of Friedrich Hayek and used to be a militant of the student fascist group Occident. Apart from Madelin, French parties of all hues -- red, blue, green and brown -- once again united in defending French cultural identity. Le Monde cited Lionel Jospin's speech of 1999, in which he said "La culture ne peut être traitée comme une marchandise." Bruno Gollnisch, the brown-populist ideologue of the National Republican Movement, deceptively sounded more radical than Jospin. Gollnisch flayed Messier's betrayal of the cultural exception as "the translation of a capitalist logic" and, far from firing his revolver when he heard the word culture, he viewed it as "the soul of a people ...[which] should not be subjected to the laws of the marketplace."

The problem with the "cultural exception" to neoliberalism's commodification of everything is precisely that it is an exception, around which it is politic for everyone in French political life to rally as an embattled bastion of national pride. About the totality of commodification, only political figures to the left of the Socialist Party - who represent nearly 20% of the French electorate - are willing to make a similar principled claim, most notably José Bové, whose interview-book, as you know, is titled: « Le monde n'est pas une marchandise » (The World Is Not For Sale).

Nonetheless, on the question of agricultural production, there is a real consensus in France, and even in Europe, against allowing U.S. producers to dump unsafe, hormone-ridden and genetically manipulated food on the rest of the world. Indeed, it was this

opposition that led to the punitive sanctions on European products, including the roquefort made from the milk of José Bové's ewes, sanctions which in turn inspired, as a form of symbolic retaliation to the U.S. import tax, the dismantling of Millau's McDonald. Now the leader of the Confédération paysanne makes clear that in opposing junk food and global commodification he is not opposing "Americanization", but something much broader and yet more specific: neoliberal trade laws. These may most often work to the advantage of American corporations, but their principles are not particularly American, considering that they were developed by an Austrian economist, and first effectively implemented by an English greengrocer's daughter. In fact, even within the heartland of the cultural exception, prominent citizens close to French corporate interests like Messier and Madelin have been willing to brave charges of betrayal to endorse the extension of neoliberal principles to everything saleable. Outside the hexagon, where capitalists and social democrats of all countries have united behind the principles of global neoliberalism, few are the voices of political dignitaries willing to challenge any part of those principles. Even the sole remaining Communist Party in charge of a major country, the People's Republic of China, has for years engaged in a titanic struggle to join the neoliberal World Trade Organization, at the expense of hundreds of millions of impoverished, downsized Chinese proletarians and peasants.

Moreover, as far as the United States is concerned, it is simplistic to conflate the totality of its people, their many cultures and social attitudes, with the sins of corporate neoliberalism. Many American citizens are profoundly, desparately dissatisfied with the commercial policies that have long undermined democracy and accentuated inequalities, at home and abroad. Indeed, the recent wave of global resistance to this commercialization began with the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization by American unionists, ecologists and social radicals in Seattle.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that a plurality of the corporate heavyweights in the ring are American-based corporations, and that the United States has been the only nation-state fully able to advance the interests of its corporate megaliths through such organs as the North American Free Trade Area, the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF.²

The question then arises not merely of the defense of France's culture, but of Europe's and the world's, and not only of the cultural sphere, but of the entire complex texture of European and world civilization, against the claims of an American-led neoliberal hegemony. José Bové's peaceful guerilla against this hegemony strikes it at its weakest point: its industrialized agriculture. In fact, his resistance bears the seed of a European alternative which, I believe, may advance us considerably toward the realization of global justice. Indeed, his very popularity in France suggests fundamental differences between Europe and America that would justify viewing a Social Europe as a potential challenger to the global hegemony of neoliberalism.

Industrialized agriculture is of course prevalent in Europe as well as in the United States, but, if the fast-food culture -- malbouffe -- has erupted everywhere, it is nowhere near as firmly implanted on this side of the Atlantic as on the other one. There is a more profoundly rooted sense of good eating over here, particularly in France. Because of repeated alarms about the animal diseases and the pollution of land and water arising from industrial agriculture, Europeans generally show more sensitivity both to the ecological and to the public health implications of the agro-business. A sensitivity that, after the umpteenth food scare in recent years resulted in political plans in several countries (Germany, the Netherlands) to convert agricultural production as far as possible to ecologically sound forms of small scale farming. Moreover, while most European political parties of the right, the center and the left embrace neoliberalism in principle, there is too broad and too well organized a stratum of ecological criticism to permit even the most cravenly pro-American regime, like Blair's New Labour, to accept unequivocally imports of hormonally inflated beef, genetically manipulated soya etc.

Agricultural production, while not the largest part of international trade, is the best-subsidized branch of the European economy. This is less because of the concern for the quality of life exhibited by José Bové than because it is the part of each nation's production that is the most dependent on local taste and domestic tradition and the least susceptible to capital export. A Phillips or even a BMW, eager to escape domestic taxes and wage rates, can easily export its factories outside of Europe. A Norman or Frisian dairy producer cannot. It is true of course, as Bové and others have pointed out, that decades of rationalization, industrialization and concentration under a regime of trade liberalization have cut the farming population of Europe back to 5 % or less of the working population. Only a minority of the remaining, mostly large-scale farmers, share the predilection of the Confédération paysanne for quality production. Moreover, factory food production encourages factory food consumption, and the impoverishment of eating habits will be directly proportional to the imprisonment of the population as a whole in the cage of capitalist technologies and mentalities. But the cage is weaker here than in North America. Why?

In the States, the unusually long hours worked by most Americans³ eliminates for them the possibility of careful food preparation, and in consequence junk food eating habits, paralleling the development of the farm-factory, have proliferated to an extreme.⁴ In Europe, where collective responsibility for social problems and concern for the quality of life has led to a shorter work week, this proliferation has not reached anything like stateside dimensions. And widespread European concern about the quality of food gives ecological production such status that considerable public sympathy supports those militantly opposing free import of dangerous foods from North American agro-chemical giants.

The question for those concerned with strategies of social change that go beyond present electoral politics is how to expand the French resistance to neoliberalism in matters of food and cultural production in two directions: to the neoliberal attack on the quality and security of existence in general and to Europe as a whole. These two points are inseparable.

In the first place, there is little point in trying to keep out shoddy food, and even less to trying to preserve traditions of culture, if we accept a social and economic policy that permits neoliberal control over industrial production and services. For the disastrous effects of neoliberal downsizing, privatising and deregulation on work time and on the private, non-commercialised areas of human existence are precisely what underlay the proliferation of the junk food culture in North America. Those effects can only be countered by a reassertion of the European tradition of collective responsibility for the *res publica*. Under twenty-first century conditions, that means a social order oriented to security, sustainability and democratic control.

Security has been multiply undermined by the neoliberal order of things. Ruthless corporate management based on maximizing profits and repeated cost-cutting "downsizing" operations, an inevitable aspect of the competition for investor favour, undermine the security of everyone working for competitively run corporations. But the malaise goes much further than job insecurity in private industry and commerce, attacking the social substance of the republic itself. Deregulation of economic life, budget cutting and privatization of public enterprises, social services and public space, in everything from health services to transportation to postal services, to school systems and energy utilities, to living and shopping arrangements have undermined the security of the employees of such services, of the public dependent on them, and, particularly in the United States, of the citizenry in their private as well as their professional existences. The customers of railroads in most countries where they have been privatised can testify to this, counting their dead and injured in collisions and derailments caused by neglect of costly maintenance, and often stressed out because of chaotic schedules. Since September 11, relatives and friends of the some 3,000 victims of privatised and

deregulated airline security in the United States can also say something about it, as could the browned-out dupes of California's privatised energy companies last summer. In France, government employees had since the 'eighties increasingly been subject to Taylorizing neoliberal management schemes which, via the customary regimen of downsizing and speed-ups, wrecked their on-job sociability and their pleasure in their work.⁵ In 1995 they reacted against the further prospect of pension loss and privatisation under the Juppé government by a spontaneous general strike. In what *Le Monde* called "the first revolt against globalization" they forced the government to back down and ultimately obliged Jacques Chirac to call the new elections that brought in the present ruling left coalition.

Deregulated industrialization of agriculture, as the *Confédération Paysanne* has pointed out, also undermines the security of consumers, opening the way to the legion of illnesses of domestic animals and to the widespread use of hormones that is rapidly turning Europe into a continent of vegetarians. In the United States, the broader invasiveness of a neoliberal economy exacerbates this problem of malbouffe. An implicit alliance between on the one hand low-wage, high-pressure employers who leave their overworked employees too little time to prepare their own food, and on the other, junk food emporia based on industrial agriculture has produced a population in which more than half the adults and a quarter of the children suffer from obesity or overweight⁶, a good preparation for heart disease, diabetes and cancer, among other things, for whose treatment those Americans able to afford health insurance are then delivered to the tender mercies of the private-enterprise HMO.

At another level, the privatization of public space, evident in America's gated communities and private shopping malls, also erodes security, by allowing a super-affluent minority to carve out privately protected areas in which they need never confront the impoverished many (except, of course, as domestic servants). This social order breeds arrogance in the rich, cynicism and resentment among the poor and paranoia in the broad middle class, which, unable to retreat to the gilded, protected estates of the wealthy, lives in fear of the violent solutions of the underclass.

Against these multiple assaults on body and mind, a real program for the security as well as the freedom of citizens would restore regulation and collective responsibility, reducing the work week wherever possible, restricting harmful media advertising and deleterious corporate influence on private life and social existence and, in the name of future generations, instituting ecological standards for production and for energy manufacture and use. Given the defects of formal democracy and conservative control of the media in the United States, such a program is unlikely to develop there. In Europe, it has a better chance, but not in any of its isolated nation-states.

Indeed, resistance to neoliberalism in a single country has an even more dismal perspective than socialism in one country had eighty years ago. The failure of the first Mitterand septennat's program to re-socialize the French economy makes that clear. While global resistance is desirable and, in the long term, indispensable, in the short and medium term -- by which I mean the next twenty years or so -- I would argue that the most plausible locus for such resistance, indeed the precondition for its success, is a Europe integrated socially as well as economically and endowed with a democratic federal government.

Such a Europe would not be isolationist. It could confront the rest of the world with a model of social welfare and sustainability that it could use as a guide and criterion for its trade relations, extending major credits to countries that accept this criterion in their own social order and limiting trade with those that do not. Its potential value would be four-fold:

A social Europe could offer its population renewed security and equal chances in matters of education, employment, health and old age, of the sort that has been eroded nearly out of existence in North America.

It could break through the monolithic neoliberal world order now prevailing and offer to the less developed countries an alternative model and, more importantly, an alternative source of investment to that of U.S.-dominated international financial institutions; It could show the world that technology can be subjected to environmental and social restraints. The goal would be to leave to the dignity of man the producer those areas, such as agriculture, where it is preferable to return to small-scale production, and to find alternate sources of energy to curb global warming and other long-term dangers to the human species;

It could encourage free debate on ideals that transcend our present way of life.⁷ For example, under the same social and ecological restraints, we might use work-reducing technology to shorten work-time rather than increase production. Here the aim would be to permit and encourage the cultivation of new life-styles, living arrangements and social experiments that would gradually reorient popular mentalities from the current values of work and consumption to the cultivation of our species' capacity for play, speculation and aesthetic creation.

A social Europe of the kind I have described would have little possibility of realization if it were completely incompatible with the interests of European capital. Fortunately, despite the inroads of neoliberal management, there are strong traditions in European capitalism that could support a coalition with labour, farmers confederations and the ecological movement for the sake of a restoration of collective control over a society that will otherwise follow its Anglo-Saxon predecessors down the path to disintegration. Examples are the Rhineland model of co-determination, the French corporatist tradition of public responsibility, the Dutch "polder model" of consensus between capital and labour. It may seem that I am being wildly optimistic in projecting the utopian possibilities sketched above out of a possible strengthening of conservative capitalist resistance to U.S.-led neoliberal domination. Nonetheless, there are good historical arguments for the notion that any kind of fundamental social change begins with dissidence within the prevailing system. The present shadowy difference between North American and European capitalisms has rich potentialities.

The European Reformation, for example, was almost exclusively the work of dissident Christian priests and theologians, disgusted with the corruption of the true faith by the institutions and values of the Holy See. Their success in breaking the monolithic hold of the Church had two meta-historical supports. One was from sections of the European nobility that protected the reformers. In England, the monarchy as a whole early created a rival, Anglican Church that challenged Roman Catholicism and gave extra room for more radical reformers. The other was the invention of the printing press, permitting the reproduction and circulation of scripture to all who could read, an invention comparable in its implications for the democratization of knowledge to that of the internet today. Similarly, the French Revolution was precipitated by the refusal of a major institution of the Old Regime's elites, the provincial parlements, to approve the monarchy's new proposals for public finance. Only, they insisted, an Estates General representing the entire social order could legitimize such far-reaching changes. Resistance of those noble assemblies thus preceded and made possible the events of 1789.

If one accepts these historical and theoretical premises, then the question for strategists of social movements in Europe becomes more specific: with what social forces, with what ideology and in what political framework can one work toward a "Social Europe" from the already existing European Union?

No doubt, the institutional and ideological obstacles to this are formidable. I want, in the last part of this paper, to examine these and see what might be done about them. To begin with, the European Union, which has its origins in the post-war European coal and steel community, has always been primarily a construction of the industrial, banking and commercial sectors of its constituent members. The elaboration of European law, the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, and now the introduction of the common currency, are the ultimate expressions of that construction. The European parliament has been kept deliberately powerless, and the main sources of authority have been the councils of ministers, in particular the economic and financial council. Moreover, under the influence of neoliberal-influenced European legal principles, traditionally collective aspects of the social order in individual European countries have for decades been undermined by the notion of individual property rights. Finally, the project of a "social Europe" is impeded by the fact that, given deeply rooted national traditions and languages, there is so little popular identification, in the fifteen member states of the Union, with Europe as a whole. Indeed, its institutional structure is widely viewed as the repair of overpaid bureaucrats colluding with corporate lobbyists.

Nonetheless, there is reason to hope for a strengthening of both the executive federal authority of the EU and of its democratically elected parliament. For the introduction of the Euro and the hammering at the gates of aspirant member states from the former Soviet Empire have led to a number of audacious projects for both democratization and the strengthening of its executive and legislative powers by two of Europe's leading Greens, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Joschka Fischer, as well as by two of its leading philosophers, Jürgen Habermas and Pierre Bourdieu. What is necessary now is for the European trade union movements, the environmental and human rights movements, and political-economic pressure groups like the Attac to enter a constructive dialogue with such figures to work out a common program that they could present to their members for ratification.. Through such a program, the Realpolitik of necessary political reform might be supplemented by both democratization and a clear social and ecological agenda.

In concluding, I would like to return to José Bové's perspectives and values. These are internationalist, personalist and, in the sense of basing social change on the voluntary action of workers, anarchist.⁸ José Bové began his militancy as an anti-militarist, opposing extension of the military base in Larzac and supporting conscientious objectors, an anti-war position that may be more relevant now than thirty years ago. He developed into a principled internationalist. In his debate with Jean-Pierre Chèvenement, he correctly argued that the nation-state was an obsolete framework for resisting the encroachment of corporate capitalism on the social order, and that only an end to immigration restrictions and a concern for overcoming the north-south divide could bring about a more peaceful world.⁹

Finally, his emphasis on lived human experience is exemplary for the European resistance to what Serge Latouche, another disciple of Jacques Ellul, calls the mégamachine. This is where the beginning and the end of JB's social commitment come together. Anti-militarist and anti-capitalist, his concerns for individual as well as collective existence, for protection against the violence of the state, and for integration of the social and the natural worlds is the antithesis of the giant machines which move effortlessly from the management of a work-and-consume social order to the infliction of mass death on the poorest countries of the world.

Notes

1 José Bové and François Dufour, *The World Is Not For Sale*, and José Bové, « A Framers' International ? (interview), *New Left Review*, Nov/Dec 2001, p.89-101 (#12, new series).

- 2** According to Paul Krugman, it is « with considerable justification » that « much of the world views [the IMF] as a branch of the U.S. Treasury Department ». « Argentina's Crisis Is a U.S. Failure », *International Herald Tribune*, Jan. 2, 2002.
- 3** Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American*, Basic Books 1991 ; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, Metropolitan Books 2001.
- 4** Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation. The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*, Houghton Mifflin 2001. According to Schlosser, "On any given day in the United States about one-quarter of the adult population visits a fast-food restaurant."(p.3) Schlosser attributes to lengthening work time, declining real wages and a consequent doubling of the proportion of mothers who work (from one third to two thirds) in the last generation, the facts that money spent on food prepared at home has dropped from three quarters to half of food expenditure, and that of the other half , most of it is spent in fast food restaurants. He also points out that the 1,000 McDonald's outlets of 1968 had grown to 28,000 in 2001 and that "one out of every eight workers in the United States has at some point been employed by McDonalds."(p.4)
- 5** Jean-Jacques Le Goff in Jean-Jacques Le Goff and Alain Caillé, *Le Tournant de décembre*, La Découverte 1996.
- 6** Schlosser, *op.cit.*, p.249.
- 7** An example of such debate in the mainstream press : Samuel Brittan, « Economic possibilities for our grandchildren », *Financial Times*, Jan.5 2002.
- 8** He acknowledges his debt to Bakunin in *The World Is Not For Sale*, p.140.
- 9** "A Farmers' International", p.97-98.