

## GLOBALIZATION AND FRENCH CULTURAL IDENTITY

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The nature of the French economy has changed radically in recent years. Breaking with its mercantilist and *dirigiste* past, France has since the early 1980s converted to market liberalization, both as the necessary by-product of European integration and globalization and as a deliberate effort by policy-makers. Whereas the French state used to own large sectors of the economy, partly to keep them from foreign control, now even a Socialist-led government proceeds with privatization, with scant regard for the nationality of the buyer. French companies themselves have also been adapting to globalization, largely through a wave of international mergers and acquisitions over which the once all-powerful state has had little influence. France's adaptation to the global world economy is finally paying off in terms of performance, which is now arguably better than it has been since the 1960s. It seems that for many in France, the loss of state control and growing inequalities that result from globalization may be a price worth paying for increased prosperity and jobs. Indeed, it is fair to say that where the economy is concerned, France has been quietly, steadily, and highly effectively adapting to globalization.<sup>1</sup>

Yet this is not the image that one usually associates with the French reaction to globalization. Instead of France's remarkable adaptation, most observers have focused on France's resistance to globalization—above all symbolized by the actions of the sheep farmer José Bové, who in August 1999 dismantled a McDonald's restaurant to protest against US sanctions, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and globalization in general. France, of course, is hardly the only country worried about the consequences of globalization, and the street

protests that took place at the November 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle showed that even in the United States many are apprehensive. Yet given the widespread public support for Bové in France (after his court trial 45 percent of the French said they supported or felt sympathy for him, compared to just 4 percent who were opposed or hostile), the countless number of articles, books, and TV programs denouncing globalization, and the rhetoric of French politicians about the need to *maîtriser la mondialisation*, it is easy to understand why there has been far more focus on France's resistance to globalization than on its adaptation.<sup>2</sup>

Globalization poses a particular challenge for France for three main reasons. First is France's statist, *dirigiste* political and economic tradition. Because globalization implies that the market, and not the state, determines economic relationships, it is particularly difficult to accept for a society that is used to looking to the state to provide jobs, redistribute incomes, protect against unwanted imports, and promote prestigious industrial sectors and perceived national interests. Prompted in part by European integration, the French economy has evolved significantly away from *dirigisme* over the past twenty years, but the process has been slow and painful, and it is far from complete. Today France still has one of the largest state sectors in Europe (the government spends 54 percent of GDP, and nearly 25 percent of French workers get their paychecks from the state) and the French still look to the state, rather than the market, to ensure their well-being. All this makes it particularly difficult for the French to accept that their economic, social, and cultural fate is controlled less and less by Paris, and more and more by the rest of the world.

Second, globalization is a particular challenge for France because it is seen to threaten the global stature of a country that has long prided itself on its international prominence. Whereas smaller European countries largely got out of the global diplomatic game after World War II (and larger ones like Great Britain felt they could best maintain theirs by working closely with the United States), France has never given up its desire for global influence in the name of its universal values. Globalization threatens this influence, however, by reinforcing the dominance of the country that most stands in France's way in its quest for diplomatic influence, the United States. To the extent that globalization means ceding world leadership to the United States—or even limiting France's traditional diplomatic role by ceding more power to collective organizations like the European Union (EU) or the United Nations (UN)—it is particularly difficult for France to accept.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, and most importantly, the French are particularly proud of their culture and identity, which many feel is now threatened by a globalization often equated with Americanization. This is of course a recurring theme in France, but it has re-emerged and taken on particular momentum today, because of the way in which new technologies and the growing ideology of free trade have helped to make societies more susceptible than ever to foreign

cultural influences, and in particular to that of the United States. The spread of the Internet and other communications technologies; trade liberalization in agricultural goods, intellectual property, and services; and the dominant role of the United States (and thus the English language) in global business all combine to make the French worry about their cultural, linguistic, and culinary traditions—in short, their national identity—in a globalizing world. It was no coincidence that the publicity-conscious Bové chose McDonald's—the very symbol of the American threat to French culture and identity—as the target for his protests against the US sanctions on French cheese and other products.

The real threat to France from globalization is thus not economic but cultural: it is not so much the disappearance of *dirigisme* that worries the French, but the disappearance of France itself. The desire to maintain a culture of universal radiance and concomitant fear of cultural domination are hardly new issues in France. Throughout the postwar period, France has periodically undergone “identity crises,” often, but not always, focused on a concern about the cultural domination of the United States. What is new is the way in which French identity and culture today seem increasingly threatened by globalization. Uncontrolled globalization, many French worry, will oblige France to abandon some of the most distinctive, and best loved, aspects of its entertainment, art, culinary traditions, and language—in short those things that most make France identifiable as France.

Such concerns are evident in public opinion surveys, which reveal that a majority of the French believe that globalization threatens their national identity.<sup>4</sup> The polls also show a particular concern that globalization will come in the form of Americanization: 65 percent of the French see “excessive” US influence on French television, 57 percent on French cinema, 37 percent on French music, 34 percent on the French language, and 34 percent on French food.<sup>5</sup> Public opinion research also suggests that the French are more worried than their neighbors: 33 percent of the French said that US popular culture was a “serious or very serious threat” to their own culture, compared to 27 percent in the United Kingdom, 24 percent in Germany and 19 percent in Italy.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, given the penetration of American culture (such as music and clothing) among the younger generation, even younger French people seem to share these concerns, with no less than 74 percent of French people from ages 15-24 expressing the view that the influence of American culture in France is “excessive.”<sup>7</sup>

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that almost all French politicians support efforts to limit globalization when it comes to issues that affect culture and identity—a policy often referred to as the “cultural exception.” Indeed, whereas in the economic area there is at least some debate across the political spectrum about whether to embrace or contain globalization (even if the “embracers” are few and quiet), there is a broad and strong consensus in France on the need to defend France's identity, way of life, and cultural heritage. As globalization proceeds, as *The Economist* put it in late 1999, “French

politicians have been queuing up to support the right to cultural protectionism.”<sup>8</sup> This interventionist urge might itself result, in part, from the retreat of the French state from its *dirigiste* economic role. Since global economic liberalism means that the French state has less and less control over the economic outcomes that it used to manage, French leaders must rely increasingly on social and cultural policies to tame the worst excesses of a globalization that they realize they cannot stop.

### Trade and the Challenge to Cultural Identity

Globalization in its current incarnation may be causing the latest phase of French concerns about cultural identity, but such concerns have a long history. Throughout the 20th century, and in particular during the postwar period, France has worried that its distinct culture and way of life was under threat and that it was gradually losing its capacity for cultural *rayonnement*—often to the new global cultural power, the United States.<sup>9</sup> French concerns about culture and identity have appeared in cycles of greater or lesser intensity throughout the entire postwar period—from the 1946 Blum-Byrnes negotiations on protection for the movie industry, to the fear of Coca-Colonization in the 1950s, the threat of the “American challenge” in the 1960s, and the “Disneyfication” of Europe in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup>

The latest wave of concern stems from the new extent of openness to outside cultural influences associated with globalization. Globalization is seen as a new threat to culture and identity because it breaks down both the *natural* barriers to external cultural influences via technology (such as the Internet and falling communication and transportation costs) and the *artificial* barriers (such as trade and investment restrictions) via increasingly open trade that extends deeper and deeper into the national economy and society.

When trade liberalization was limited to certain types of goods and services and was primarily about tariffs and quotas, trade politics revolved essentially around *economic* arguments 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. With each round of multilateral trade negotiations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), however, traditional trade barriers have been further reduced and new types of non-tariff barriers tackled. During the 1987-93 “Uruguay Round,” the “new issues” of services and intellectual property were added to the traditional trade agenda. By touching on domestically sensitive sectors, trade was starting to impinge on national prerogatives and, at the same time, affecting directly definitions of national identity. Subsuming these new issues under the reach of “trade” naturally led to the inclusion of even more sensitive issues, such as food safety and labor laws, for subsequent discussion in international trade forums.

Culture was among these “new” issues discussed in the Uruguay Round. In 1993, towards the end of the round, the United States attempted to apply free trade to “cultural goods” (primarily audiovisual, through a questioning of the legitimacy of the European directive “Television Without Borders”). This led to a strong reaction in France, which managed, not always easily, to win the support of its European partners to defend the principle of “cultural exception” on the premise that culture was not merchandise like any other. Despite strong lobbying from the Hollywood entertainment industry, Europe successfully resisted US pressure on the cultural issue. For President Mitterrand, this was no less than a “question of civilization,” and France managed to preserve the right to subsidize and protect its “cultural goods” with quotas.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to what is often assumed, the GATT accord did not *explicitly exclude* cultural goods from free trade in services, but by failing explicitly to include those goods, the result effectively gave the EU the right to do so.

The issue of cultural exception emerged again a few years later in the context of the negotiations over the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). Conceived of in 1995 and launched in 1997 in Paris, the MAI negotiations between the 29 members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) were designed to establish rules governing investment, in the same way that the GATT, and later the WTO, established rules for free trade.<sup>12</sup> One of the consequences of the draft agreement would have been to render illegal regulations protecting cultural investments in Europe (which the French had prevented the 1993 Uruguay Round agreement from doing). Consumer groups in the United States and Canada publicized the draft text and launched an international campaign of opposition to these negotiations. Under the impulse of Jack Lang, the French entertainment sector mobilized against the MAI, which was scheduled to be signed in April 1998. Just as they had in the GATT negotiations, famous French directors, actors, and musicians raised public awareness about the dangers of subjecting culture to the imperatives of global capital. Eventually, the message got across to politicians, who pulled France out of the negotiations, triggering their collapse. The defeat of the MAI was the first real victory of the antiglobalization camp and the first successful alliance between the cultural sector and other segments of the French society (such as farmers and intellectuals) in the name of defending France’s culture from globalization.

Because of the evolving nature of trade during the 1990s, the French debate on the virtues and problems of free trade has shifted from the economic to the political and cultural realms. When the United States and the EU argued over the issue of “cultural exception” at the end of the Uruguay Round in 1993, the debate was limited to cultural goods narrowly defined. What has changed in recent years is the realization that the threat to French culture comes not only from trade in cultural goods, but more broadly from trade in general; a movie by Eric Rohmer, after all, is no more a defining component of French cultural identity than foie gras or Parisian cafés—and all seem threatened by globalization.

### Preserving Diversity in the Entertainment Sector

Some of the greatest debates about the cultural influences of globalization are in the entertainment sector, primarily cinema and television. Looking at the extent of the domination of those American industries in France, and in Europe more widely, it is easy to understand the French concern. According to the *Observatoire européen de l'audiovisuel*, the EU market for US audiovisual goods broadly defined (including box-office receipts, video cassette rentals, and television rights) was \$7.4 billion in 1998, compared with a US market for Europeans of just \$706 million.<sup>13</sup> The deficit, moreover, has been growing since the end of 1980s, when it was only around \$2 billion (in 1988). Between 1985 and 1999, the US share of the average EU market went from 56 percent to 70 percent of ticket sales.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the US market continues to appear largely impenetrable: just 1-2 percent of films shown on US screens are translated, and hardly any European productions appear on American television.<sup>15</sup>

The situation for music and books is less dire from a European point of view, but both still show strong international, and particularly American, influence. As of 1996, 48 percent of the music played on French radio stations was French (with 43 percent international and 8 percent classical), a national proportion slightly higher than in other European countries.<sup>16</sup> This is at least an improvement from the situation before 1994-1995, when 80 percent of popular music on French radio stations was American or British.<sup>17</sup> As for books, in most of the major European countries less than a quarter of published books were translated works (14 percent for Germany, 17 percent for France, 25 percent for Italy, and 26 percent for Spain), though these figures tend to understate the real foreign impact since the proportion of translated works among best-sellers is normally higher. Of books translated into French, 45 percent were of American origin, and 30 percent British. Again, even these lower rates contrasted sharply with the situation in the United States, where only 3 percent of published books were translated (though of course there were British imports that did not need to be.)<sup>18</sup>

The area of greatest concern for France within the entertainment sector is cinema. The French cinema industry—thanks in part to large government subsidies and other forms of protection for French movie producers—is faring much better than any other in Europe. After a decline in the early 1990s, France is producing 100 to 150 full-length features annually (more if co-productions are counted), which is far more than in either Germany or Italy.<sup>19</sup> In 1999, French movies captured about 38 percent of ticket sales in France, compared to 24 percent for Italian movies in Italy, 18 percent for British films in the UK, 14 percent for German movies in Germany, and 10 percent for Spanish films in Spain.<sup>20</sup> With respect to television programming—arguably more important in terms of cultural influence because more people watch television—the French are also faring better in relative terms than their European counterparts, but not entirely resisting American domination. Foreign films

take “only” a 35-39 percent share of the market on the main French television stations, compared with 43-85 percent for Germany; 62-77 percent for Spain; 60-84 percent for Britain; and 52-71 percent for Italy.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this relatively good performance compared to other European countries, the reality is that the French movie sector continues to be dominated by American exports. For the year 2000, only one French film, *Harry, un ami qui vous veut du bien*, made it into the top-ten summer box office, and French movies accounted for only 7 percent of tickets sold during the summer (compared with 91 percent for US films).<sup>22</sup> For 1999, exceptionally, a French film (or at least a co-production involving France), *Astérix et Obélix*, was the top box-office draw in France. But it was the exception that proved the rule, as eight of the next nine biggest successes in the same year were American films (or in two cases Anglo-American films).<sup>23</sup> Of the 40 most successful films in France in 1999, 26 were American and 7 French (plus three French co-productions). Moreover, while it is true that increasing numbers of French movies are being *made* (rising from 95 in 1995 to 148 in 1998 and 181 in 1999), they are not necessarily being *seen* by increasing numbers of viewers. In 1998, for example, three French films, *Le Dîner de Cons*, *Les Visiteurs 2*, and *Taxi*, were among the top four in ticket sales in France, falling behind only the American *Titanic*; but those three films accounted for no less than 45 percent of the revenues from all the 148 French movies made that year, meaning that the other 145 did not attract large numbers of viewers. No other French film that year made it into the top 50.

Even these figures, moreover, are exaggerated, because of the very loose interpretation of what “French” is, since many films bend the rules to get access to French subsidies. Examples of this include the 1995 Milos Forman film *Valmont*, which counted as “French” even though it was a Franco-British co-production, shot in English, with seven American and two British actors, and Roland Joffé’s 1999 Franco-American co-production of *Vatel*, which was shot in English and starred an American actress.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, seeking to reach a wider audience, more and more French filmmakers are also starting to film in English, such as Luc Besson and his recent *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*.<sup>25</sup> In the face of this globalization of the film industry, it is becoming harder to attribute a nationality to a movie.

To defend their domestic production, the French—pulling the Europeans along when possible—have resorted to a variety of protectionist measures for what they define as cultural goods. At France’s urging, for example, the European Union in 1989 passed a television broadcasting directive called *Television Without Frontiers* (ironically, since from a non-European perspective it was about television *with* frontiers) to help support the European industry.<sup>26</sup> The directive requires that “when practicable” a majority proportion of transmission time (excluding time for news, sports, and advertisements) be of European origin, with “European” being defined as films originating in Europe, mainly made by authors and workers residing in Europe, and, for co-productions, “preponder-

ant” control by Europeans.<sup>27</sup> Some countries are more rigorous than others in enforcing the directive (indeed many get away with broadcasting a large proportion of their “European” quotas at times when few people are watching), but France has chosen to impose even stricter regulations—60 percent of transmissions must be European and 50 percent must be in the French language—and to apply narrower definitions of what constitutes a European production.

The French are also much more aggressive in defending their cinema industry. The main tool for this is a 10-percent cinema tax (which, given their domination of the market, is to a large extent a tax on American films), the revenue from which is used to subsidize French productions. These subsidies may take any of three forms—an advance before the film, an advance for distribution, or aid for script development—and are often given out based on a governmental body’s assessment of the “quality” of the film based on an initial reading of the script.<sup>28</sup> Films are eligible for aid, in the form of an advance on their projected earnings, if they are shot in French with “predominantly French personnel.” The average subsidy per film is currently 2 million FF, and of the 181 films produced in France in 1999, only 3 were able to cover costs at the French box office.<sup>29</sup>

Why are the French willing to go to such extremes—incurring clear economic costs, ruffling feathers with some of their European partners, and provoking major trade disputes with the United States—in order to defend their national audiovisual industries? To an extent, support for subsidies for French cinema are based on the perception of an uneven playing field, and the view that market failure needs to be corrected. Foreign Minister Védrine, for example, defends the widespread view that cultural goods cannot be “treated, produced, exchanged, and sold like any other,” and points to the “vast internal market” and “huge resources” that enable Hollywood to “flood markets abroad.”<sup>30</sup> Former Culture Minister Lang adds that “the traditional market system cannot always assure the necessary financing” to keep French cinema in business, and other analysts, such as Laurent Burin des Roziers, point to American control of distribution channels, massive marketing budgets, and unwillingness to show subtitled films as among the reasons for the American domination.<sup>31</sup> All of these arguments are widely accepted in France, and contain more than an element of truth.

Yet the *main* argument for protecting the French audiovisual industry is not economic or commercial, but cultural. Indeed, even many who would agree with what *Libération*’s film critic has called the “unpleasant truth”—that “the average American film [might be] better than the average French film”—believe French cinema should be defended.<sup>32</sup> It should be defended, they argue, in order to preserve what is unique about French identity and culture, and to preserve cultural diversity in France and for the world. Since the mid-1990s, in fact, the French have started talking a lot less about the “cultural exception” and more about “cultural diversity,” a more positive way of looking at the need to defend French culture in an age of globalization.<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately, the defense of French cinema and other visual arts is largely a “public goods” argument: diversity benefits all the French and the world as a whole, so the government must step in to correct what would otherwise be a market failure. Again in Védrine’s words, the “desire to preserve cultural diversity in the world is in no way a sign of anti-Americanism but of anti-hegemonism, a refusal of impoverishment. American cinema has been enchanting viewers around the world for nearly a century, and that will continue. This is no reason for others to disappear.”<sup>34</sup>

### Food, Culture, and Identity

Food is another area in which the French government has stepped in to attempt to contravene market forces in the name of the preservation of cultural diversity. Of all the components of French cultural identity, food may be one of the most universally recognized internationally and one of the greatest sources of pride domestically. Consequently, perceived threats to that source of pride are taken very seriously. As Jean-Michel Normand argued in *Le Monde*, “McDonald’s ... commercial hegemony threatens our agriculture and its cultural hegemony insidiously ruins alimentary behavior—both sacred reflections of the French identity.”<sup>35</sup> “Resistance to the hegemonic pretenses of hamburgers,” *Le Monde*’s Alain Rollat agreed, “is, above all, a cultural imperative.”<sup>36</sup> The huge success of Jean-Pierre Coffe, who has made a career—through books and highly popular television appearances—of defending French culinary traditions against *la malbouffe*, is another indication of how seriously the French public takes the issue.<sup>37</sup>

According to its critics, fast food, in particular, embodies globalization in its culinary dimension. It is a one-size-fits-all approach to food, encouraging uniformity and playing on the lowest common denominator of tastes. As such, it is the direct opposite of French culinary traditions. The mayor of one small village in southwestern France sums up how globalization is the antithesis of French gastronomic traditions: “Roquefort is made from the milk of only one breed of sheep, it is made in only one place in France, and it is made in only one special way. It is the opposite of globalization. Coca-Cola you can buy anywhere in the world and it is exactly the same.”<sup>38</sup>

Fast food has also become a symbolic target of antiglobalization protesters because of its American origin. According to French sociologist Michel Crozier: “For many French people there is an association that good food is French and fast food is American and foreign and bad.”<sup>39</sup> The French Agriculture Minister, Jean Glavany, expressed this view by declaring to the press in June 1999 that the United States has “the worst food in the world” and publicly announcing in August that he had never eaten at McDonald’s and disliked hamburgers.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps also for this reason, even the French people who do eat at McDonald’s do not seem prepared to admit it. According French sociologist Jean-Pierre

Poulain: “During my field research, I have been struck by the strange self-justification discourse used by most adults, saying that they were coming to McDonald’s for the first and last time. It was as if they were coming out of an X-rated movie.”<sup>41</sup>

Particularly distressing for the defenders of French culinary traditions is the enormous surge of popularity that fast food is enjoying in France. While the number of traditional brasseries and cafés has fallen from some 200,000 in 1960 to around 50,000 today, the number of fast-food and takeout businesses has doubled from 6,500 in 1993 to 13,950 in 1998.<sup>42</sup> As of March 2000, McDonald’s alone had nearly 800 outlets in France, with a total revenue of around 10 billion FF. The culinary profession contends, not entirely without reason, that this popularity is in part due to domestic tax laws: meals in French restaurants are burdened with a 20.6 percent value-added tax (reduced to 19.6 percent in spring 2000), whereas the tax rate for fast-food meals is only 5.5 percent.<sup>43</sup> Clearly, however, there are other explanations for the expansion of fast food in France—including explanations based on cost, convenience, marketing, service, and even the fact that many people appear to like it.<sup>44</sup>

Faced with this apparent attack on the national culinary identity, the French government—in ways that parallel the efforts to preserve a national entertainment industry—has taken steps to ensure the defense of the country’s gastronomic patrimony. In 1989 the Ministry of Culture created the Conseil National des Arts Culinaires (National Council of Culinary Arts), with a mission to protect French gastronomy. Among the Conseil’s various programs are taste education for schoolchildren, and the “inventory” and promotion of the culinary patrimony of each French region.<sup>45</sup>

This state intervention in the food sector raises some of the same questions as does state intervention in the entertainment industry. Why does the state feel compelled to protect its citizens from their free will? The McDonald’s on the Champs-Élysées, after all, is the most frequently patronized “restaurant” in all of France, and the crowds that gather there daily are far from all foreigners. Why do the French support, rather than resist, efforts that seem to run counter to their tastes?

One reason why the French approve of a collective struggle against McDonald’s, even if they patronize its outlets, is the widespread French belief in the value of cultural diversity. The rationale is not to get rid of McDonald’s but to ensure that it does not entirely displace traditional French restaurants and culinary traditions. As is the case for movies, it seems clear today that pure market forces have a homogenizing effect and tend to limit variety. This evolution is evident, for example, in the case of agricultural production. The number of cultivated varieties of each fruit and vegetable has considerably dwindled over the years, not only in France but everywhere in the world, as farmers have flocked towards the highest-yielding, most disease-resistant, and easiest to transport varieties (in the United States, one sees a reaction to this evolution in the movement towards restoring “heirloom” vegetables, for

instance). There is a widespread belief in France today that the same homogenization should not happen in the area of gastronomy, whose diversity is itself an essential component of French culture. If the market does not allow diversity, then market rules need to be bent (through subsidies, for example) in order to maintain a vast array of choices.

Adversaries of globalization also argue that it represents a threat to French “gastronomical sovereignty” not only because it homogenizes tastes, but also because it puts consumer health at risk. Mad cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy or BSE) and other recent food scares have put the food-safety issue at top of society’s concerns. In 1996, BSE broke out in British livestock, with the potential for causing brain disease in humans. Despite a slaughter of animals and a ban on British beef exports to other European countries, the disease was then discovered in other places, including France. “Mad cow disease” has become one of the main political and social issues of the year 2000 in France. Several other food crises added to this sense of food insecurity. For instance, in 1999 it was revealed that Belgian animal feed (especially used in poultry) was tainted with cancer-causing dioxin. This scandal had implications well beyond Belgian borders, since the tainted feed was also sold to manufacturers in France and the Netherlands. Another food scare occurred the same year when authorities in France ordered all canned Coca-Cola items (50 million cans of Coke, Coke Lite, Sprite, and Fanta) pulled off store shelves after 200 people fell ill after drinking Coca-Cola products.

Globalization is blamed for these food scares for several reasons. First, as a result of the openness in agricultural trade, France has no control over what comes across its borders, meaning that without protection this could include hormones and genetically modified food (GMOs). As Bové has put it, “all of a sudden we realized that globalization could oblige us to ingest hormones.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the 1999 WTO ruling on hormone-treated beef found the European ban illegal, but the European Union was willing to enforce the ban and face US sanctions rather than being forced against the will of its citizens to accept these products, unlabelled, on European markets. The concern over GMOs is also a widely held concern in France, although interestingly enough apparently *less* so than in other European countries. According to recent polls, 24 percent of French say they would “never” eat a genetically modified food even if it were tested and approved by government and industry experts—well short of the pluralities of Germans (46 percent), Austrians (44 percent), Italians (44 percent), and British (33 percent).<sup>47</sup>

Second, critics such as Bové and his farming organization, the Confédération Paysanne, argue that the new food safety crises result from the industrialization of agriculture.<sup>48</sup> Instead of the direct link that used to exist between the farmer and the consumer, agriculture is now part of an industrial chain. The farmers become the employees of large agri-business companies that control the seeding, the processing, and the distribution of foodstuffs. As a result of this industrialization, the process of food production is now dominated by

a race for profit, which can explain some of the unorthodox (and potentially dangerous) methods being used by today’s farmers—such as feeding herbivorous cattle with carcasses of dead animals and depleting the soil of its nutrients through an intensive use of chemicals.

A third criticism is that because of globalization food production is no longer local. It therefore becomes necessary to resort to science to ensure that food reaches the increasingly widening distance between producers and consumers in a good state. Consequently, the products eventually consumed contain more preservatives and taste worse than if they had been produced locally.<sup>49</sup> Even though French consumers buy these industrialized, non-local food products, they do share these views for the large part and would rather have their government apply the principle of precaution whenever possible. The reaction in France to the WTO ruling on hormone-treated beef and the clear opposition of the majority to genetically modified food must be understood in this context.

Responses to the portraying of globalization as a direct attack on French food identity have come from many fronts. In 1999, for the first time since the introduction of fast food in France, fast food *à la française* (baguette sandwiches from French chains) outnumbered burger chains, including McDonald’s and European brands such as Quick.<sup>50</sup> As for McDonald’s, it has felt compelled to respond to the general climate of mistrust. In the fall 1999, McDonald’s France ran a large-scale ad campaign built around the slogan “Born in the United States. Made in France.” The ads emphasized that the products used were indeed French and, in particular, that the beef was hormone-free.<sup>51</sup> And in the spring 2000, McDonald’s launched locally themed meals. In March, it ran a promotion whereby each day of the week customers could buy a burger topped with a different variety of French cheese. In April, McDonald’s proposed “gourmet” menus in the south of France, complete with burgers topped with zucchini and ratatouille, and blackcurrant ice cream for dessert. This is part of a strategy based on lessons from other American companies, including Disney, that American “cultural” exports go over best when adapted in some way to French culture.<sup>52</sup>

### Language and Francophonie

Globalization also threatens French culture because it strengthens the role of the English language—in part at the expense of French, itself a prominent component of French identity.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, many French men and women would agree with Maurice Druon, until recently perpetual secretary of the Académie Française, that “the language of a people is its soul.”<sup>54</sup> For Foreign Minister Védrine, the French “cannot accept that it would be ‘backward’ to defend our language, which is essential for our identity.”<sup>55</sup> “Our language, he asserts, is “like our genetic code.”<sup>56</sup>

Language is particularly important in France for several reasons. First, it is one of the central, unifying republican forces in France, the “cement of the republic and the values it is founded on.”<sup>57</sup> “Throughout its history,” as one expert has written, “the linguistic unification of France has been linked to its political unification and to the progress of centralization.”<sup>58</sup> This is why, for example, the French parliament in 1992 amended France’s constitution to specify that “the language of the Republic is French.”<sup>59</sup> Doing so was not only a protective measure against the intrusion of foreign words, but also against the growing popularity of some minority and regional languages (such as Breton, Corsican, Alsatian, Occitan, etc.). It is for the same reason that the French government was for years the only country in Western Europe not to sign the Charter on Regional and Minority Languages passed by the Council of Europe in 1992. And even now that France has finally signed some of the articles of the Charter, ratification is still uncertain.

A second reason why language is so important in France is that it is closely associated with a country’s stature and influence in the world, and France still seeks both stature and influence. The French realize that their language is no longer the international language of diplomacy, treaties, and nobility that it once was, but want to preserve as much of that influence as possible. As Jospin put it, “French is no longer the language of a power [but] it could be a language of counter-power.”<sup>60</sup>

Finally, the French justify their need to defend their language in the same way they justify their need to promote their cinema, television, music, food, and other aspects of their identity: as a necessary contribution to diversity both in France and throughout the world. In the words of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Secretary General of Francophonie, the defense of French is a “fight to make sure that globalization does not become a synonym for uniformization and that the respect of cultural and linguistic diversity becomes the main force for a true democracy on a global scale.”<sup>61</sup> Or to cite Jospin once again, “French can become one of the languages in which the resistance to uniformity in the world is expressed, the refusal of the fading of identities, the encouragement of one’s freedom to create and to express oneself in one’s own culture. It is in this respect that France wants to be the motor of cultural diversity in the world.”<sup>62</sup>

Concern for the future of the French language is, of course, nothing new. The Académie Française, dedicated to defense of language and culture, was created by Cardinal de Richelieu in 1635, with the sole obligation “to give clear rules to our language and make it pure, eloquent, and capable of handling the arts and the sciences.”<sup>63</sup> Today, the job of the 40 *académiciens*, with an average age well over 70, includes keeping French “pure” by protecting the language from excessive foreign influences. The Haut Comité de la Langue Française, set up by President de Gaulle in 1966, extended this mandate, defining it as “to ensure the presence and the *rayonnement* of French, the language of the Republic; to preserve the French language’s role as a language of communication;

and to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity in the world via the promotion of plurilinguism.”<sup>64</sup>

The “Organisation internationale de la Francophonie,” which was set up in 1986, is another tool used to promote French around the world. It now includes 55 member states, nine candidate members, and has an annual budget of 1 billion FF. It pursues its goals through a variety of means, including support for the teaching of French, running a worldwide French-only TV channel, developing cultural exchange, and facilitating cultural creation in French. This organization, which meets in a summit once every five years, is also active in trying to defend French in the traditional bastion where it was usually spoken: international diplomacy.

More controversially, France has sometimes resorted to legislation to defend its language. In 1975, the Bas-Lauriol law made French mandatory in all written and spoken advertising, instructions on packages, and official documents.<sup>65</sup> It also banned the use of foreign words when French alternatives are available. In 1994, the Bas-Lauriol law was updated by the Toubon law—named for Culture Minister Jacques Toubon, who as Justice Minister in 1997 called the spread of English “a new form of colonization.” The Toubon law provides for fines or even prison sentences if French is not used in advertisements, in public announcements, and at scientific conferences.<sup>66</sup> The Constitutional Council weakened the first draft of this law on grounds of freedom of expression, allowing only clauses decreeing that works contracts and instructions on medicine bottles and machinery must be in French or carry a full translation, but the final version of the law is still far-reaching.<sup>67</sup>

The Toubon law has been actively used. The Body Shop, for example, was among several dozen companies fined in 1996 for using English to advertise or label its products.<sup>68</sup> In 1998, the law resulted in nearly 8,000 linguistic inspections, 658 warnings, 255 cases to the public prosecutor, and 124 rulings won.<sup>69</sup> This law has been widely derided, both inside and outside of France, but the fact that it passed in the first place shows the extent of the concern for the future of the French language. Former Culture Minister Jack Lang, not known to shy away from defending French culture, opposed the law on the grounds that “excess *Franglais* may be absurd, but to ban it is dictatorship and more absurd.”<sup>70</sup> Védrine, however, has said that he finds “more to be said for the Toubon law ... than against it.”<sup>71</sup>

In November 1999 the French government created, under the direct control of the prime minister, the Conseil Supérieur de la Langue Française, in charge of studying issues regarding the practice, enrichment, and promotion of the French language.<sup>72</sup> In March 2000, the Ministry of Finance announced that it had banned many common English business words such as “start-up” and “e-mail.” Instead, civil servants and employees of state-run enterprises are now required to use the terms *courrier électronique* and *jeune pousse*—results of months of brainstorming by seven different committees appointed by the Ministry in 1999 to provide acceptable alternative translations to as many

English computer terms as possible. Although mocked by many, those in charge of the project insist they are simply trying to preserve the purity of the French language.

Despite these efforts, English is continuing its progression, and has clearly become the primary language of international business, diplomacy, the Internet, and even to a large extent culture. French—with 131 million speakers—is now in 9th place on the list of the world's most widely spoken languages, behind not only English (594 million) but also Spanish, Arabic, and Portuguese. As a first language, French has fallen even further, to 11th place in the world, with 70 million speakers.<sup>73</sup>

In recognition of this reality, the Jospin government is not only trying to defend the use of French in the world, but is now actually trying to promote English as second working language, as is done in other countries. The current thinking—promoted heavily by Claude Allègre, Education Minister from 1997 to 1999—is that stopping English seems futile, so the French might as well learn it better. Allègre also sought to encourage French researchers to seek a wider audience by delivering and publishing their papers in English rather than French, but this was seen as a step too far and he had to quickly retreat.<sup>74</sup> Still, English is now becoming so dominant in French secondary education that specialists are worried about what *Le Monde* has called the “homogenization” of French language training at schools. With nearly 90 percent of French secondary school students choosing English as their first foreign language, Education Ministry officials concede that it is no longer a question of “fighting for diversity of demand in terms of the first language” but to maintain diversification of the second.<sup>75</sup>

French is also losing the language battle to English in another increasingly global field, international air-traffic control—but not without a fight. In March 2000, Air France announced that its pilots would henceforth be required to speak exclusively in English when communicating with air-traffic controllers at Paris' Charles-de-Gaulle international airport. The measure was justified on safety grounds: As one of Europe's three busiest airports, it was deemed safer to have all communications in English, even between a French-speaking crew and a French-speaking control tower, so as to allow all other pilots to understand the exchange. This measure created outrage among many Air France employees, however, being interpreted as yet further evidence that France was surrendering to the tide of English. As a result of the outcry, two weeks after the measure was implemented, Air France had to reverse course and suspend the new policy.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

The effects of globalization on French cultural identity are undeniable. Because market forces tend to result in a homogenization of offerings and

eventually tastes, globalization does threaten some central elements of French national culture. It is therefore not surprising that public opinion clings to the notion that the state should offer cultural protection, especially at a time when France seems to have accepted a gradual withdrawal of the state from the management of the economy.

The French reaction against globalization reflects, to a large extent, a nostalgia for a disappearing way of life—one when France was a cultural and political leader in the world. It also reflects a feeling of powerlessness in the face of global forces—a feeling that activists such as Bové are trying to counter by taking matters into their own hands. It reflects the fact that, as with all economic, social, and political change, globalization produces “losers,” whose products are displaced by the new ones made available via the global rather than the local market; these losers are sometimes local traditions and goods. Finally, it reflects the internal contradictions felt by many French men and women, in whom coexist sentiments of criticism against the perverse effects of globalization and a recognition of its positive accomplishments as well.

Ultimately, however, globalization will not necessarily erode French identity, and while their efforts to protect it are understandable, the French are probably more sensitive than they need to be. While the argument that globalization homogenizes tastes and erases cultural borders is valid, it has a more positive counterpart that is often overlooked: globalization also enables a freer flow of cultures and traditions throughout the world. McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Mickey Mouse may well have conquered the planet, but the *rayonnement* of French culture has also benefited from globalization. In the case of food, for example, globalization has meant not only fast food and hormones in beef but has greatly expanded the variety of foods—from sushi to Tex-Mex—that can now be consumed in France. French gastronomy, moreover, is now present everywhere in the world. In New York City, for instance, the majority of the highest-rated restaurants have French chefs and offer French-inspired cooking. Cheaper, simpler French “bistros” have become ubiquitous in the United States and UK. The same is true in areas other than food. Americans can now buy their cosmetics at the French chain Sephora on Fifth Avenue in New York, order their clothing online from the French mail-order company La Redoute, dress their homes in the Provençal fabrics cherished by American interior designers, and order French wines over the Internet. These new possibilities for the spread of French culture are also products of globalization.

The same case can be made with respect to language. Taking a historical perspective, it is hard to believe that the French language will be irremediably polluted by foreign words. In any case, foreign words will blend in—as so many French words have in other languages, not the least English. There is no reason why French will be any less French if one says *mél* instead of *courrier électronique*, or *start-up* instead of *jeune-pousse*, any more than English is less English because it includes the words *restaurant* or *fuselage*. The Internet also offers a good example of how globalization can cut both ways. While it is true

that English is used on an overwhelming majority of Internet web pages (78.3 percent) and that French is very far behind (1.2 percent), it is also true that this is changing as the French are finally taking advantage of the Internet boom; and even this small window can be enough to provide access to French ideas, texts, information, and culture all around the world.<sup>77</sup> Today, even the Académie Française can now be consulted online.<sup>78</sup> And as Reginald Dale has pointed out, “half of the hits on the Internet site of the French newspaper *Libération* come from outside France, suggesting that the Internet is enabling large numbers of people who could not do so before to keep in touch with French news and cultural developments.”<sup>79</sup>

In the end, people will only learn French if there is a reason to do so—if French culture, society, and sciences have something to offer. Similarly, protection and subsidies can help guarantee that artists will still create works with “French content,” but they are no guarantee of quality, or that their work will be “consumed.” Given the attractiveness of France as a tourist destination (73 million tourists visited France in 1999, the most of any country in the world), it is fair to assume that French culture and heritage still have a lot to offer. French culture and identity have proven their resilience and capacity to adapt in the past. As Jean-François Revel put it nearly a decade ago, “If French culture can be squashed by Mickey Mouse ... it would have to be disturbingly fragile.”<sup>80</sup> We are confident that it is not so fragile.

## Notes

- Philip H. Gordon is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center on the United States and France at the Brookings Institution. Sophie Meunier is a Visiting Fellow at the Center of International Studies at Princeton University. This article is adapted from their forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *The French Challenge: Adaptation and Resistance to a Globalizing World* (Brookings Institution Press, forthcoming).
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37. See, for instance, Jean-Pierre Coffe, *Le Bon Vivre, le Vrai Vivre* (Paris: Best Pocket, 1991) and *De la vache folle en général et de notre survie en particulier* (Paris: Plon, 1999).
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40. See, for example, "French to dine in DC after disparaging US food," Reuters, 21 July 1999.
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56. Védrine, *Cartes*, p. 37.
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62. See Jospin's speech to the International Federation of French Teachers.
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67. Ardagh, *France in the New Century*, p. 705.

68. Jack, *The French Exception*, pp. 36-37.
69. Eight went to appeal and one as far as the Supreme Court. See Jack, *The French Exception*, p. 37.
70. Ardagh, *France in the New Century*, p. 705.
71. Védrine, *Cartes*, p. 37.
72. See <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/dglf> for more information.
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