

Tactics, Traditions, and Opportunities: British and French Crop Trashing Actions in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article compares the tactic of trashing genetically modified crops in activist campaigns in Britain and France. In Britain most crop trashing was carried out covertly, while in France most activists undertook open, public actions. In seeking an explanation for this, we show that the analysis of political opportunities, dominant in comparative studies of social movements, can only take us so far. While it helps explain the occurrence of direct action, it is much less useful in explaining the tactical differences between each country. We argue that a fuller explanation requires an understanding of how action was shaped by different activist traditions. In France, action was staged as a demonstration of serious, responsible, collective Republican citizenship; in the UK, activists combined a sceptical view of legality developing from anarchist individualism with an explicitly non-threatening, playful, ethos. We conclude by arguing that a focus on activist traditions can provide an effective bridge between structural and cultural approaches to understanding the determinants of social movement action.

KEYWORDS

Tradition, GMOs, sabotage, political opportunities, social movements.

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One of the key challenges associated with the study of social movements concerns the balance between external contextual factors and subjective decision-making – or to put it bluntly, between structure and agency – in explaining the collective choices made by movement actors. By looking at the empirical conundrum provided by the differences in the design of the direct action campaigns waged by opponents of the cultivation and consumption of genetically modified organisms (henceforth: GMOs) in two countries, Britain and France, we aim to show the value of the concept of *activist traditions* in establishing a balance between structure and agency in understanding social movements.

Our focus is on the tactic of ‘crop trashing’. In both countries, activists have sought to put pressure on transnational biotechnology corporations and national governments by destroying GM crop trials and – in France – commercial plantations of Monsanto’s MON810 GM maize. From a macro-structural perspective, the *occurrence* of crop trashing in these two cases can be well enough accounted for by similar structural contexts, as defined by the political opportunities literature, especially when we consider them against the much lower incidences of crop trashing in more decentralized European states such as Germany and, especially, Spain. The conundrum, then, is how we might explain the *differences* in the conduct of crop trashing between Britain and France; or, why contrasting dominant positions emerged in each country, with French activists mounting a national, public, open citizens’ campaign, and British activists overwhelmingly preferring covert nocturnal action?

Although there is a broad consensus among scholars that culture and structure both play a role in understanding social movement mobilization, there is little consensus on how to combine

them (Johnston 2011: 49). Political Process Theory (PPT) approaches, associated particularly with the work of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001; Tilly & Tarrow 2007), emphasise external contextual factors: their central tenet is that the state, through the configuration of its formal institutions, the nature of its responses to movement mobilization, and the perception of these responses and configurations by movement actors, lies at the heart of any enquiry into the emergence, development, forms and outcomes of contentious politics. Movement actors are usually assumed to be able to read the structure of political opportunities and to respond to contextual changes, whether positive (such as the availability of influential allies) or negative (threats, repression, tougher legislation). However, PPT has come under sustained criticism from numerous observers seeking to integrate the explanatory power of movement actors' ideas with those of external context (Jasper & Goodwin 1999; Oliver & Johnston 2000; Zald 2000; Polletta & Ho 2006; Armstrong & Bernstein 2008; Taylor 2010). A central area of dispute therefore concerns the relative importance of the consciousness and motives of actors (Mische & Tilly 2003: 191).

PPT's proponents claim that a focus on recurring causal mechanisms and processes is able to explain the patterns, incidence and forms of contentious politics, even where movement actors are very different. Even so, PPT advocates eschew the search for positivist laws of social science, and define their position as also reflecting contingent contexts (Tilly & Tarrow 2007: xi). Indeed, by introducing a distinction between a movement *base* and *campaign*, Tilly and Tarrow seem to have implicitly accepted the necessity of culture to a fuller understanding of movement action:

A social movement base consists of movement organizations, networks, participants and the accumulated cultural artefacts, memories, and traditions that contribute to social movement campaigns.

A social movement campaign is a sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of concerted public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment, using such means as public meetings, demonstrations, petitions, and press releases. (2007: 114)

The movement base recalls the ‘abeyance structures’ which, in Taylor’s (1989) analysis, enable continuity between movement campaigns, or Melucci’s differentiation between *latent* and *visible* phases of social movement activity (1985: 800-1). Both Taylor and Melucci stress that invisibility does not mean inactivity; campaigns are founded on networks continually at work in ‘the daily production of alternative frameworks of meaning’ (Melucci 1989: 70), without which the subsequent visible phase of organization could not develop. However, in contrast to such readings emphasising movement culture and identity, Tilly and Tarrow are careful to retain their emphasis on the causal mechanisms and processes involved in the transition from base to campaign (2007: 115); they thus maintain their focus on the ‘visible’, public manifestations of movement activity. Tilly, of course, is associated with a definition of social movements which focuses solely on the campaign, privileging instrumental and policy-directed goals in order to avoid confusing particular organizations or latent subcultures with the public contentious activity of movements (2004). However, most movement scholars have not followed this narrow definition, because excluding latent networks and internal cultures downplays the interpretive role of movements as analysts of power and producers of ideological critique.

The introduction of ‘movement base’ therefore seems to be a major revision to the argument that movements should be defined in terms of their campaign. And yet, for Tilly and Tarrow the base seems really to be a simple precursor to the real business. Whilst we share the view that campaigns are of course important, our aim here is to show the explanatory value of reversing the focus: in other words, rather than looking for the mechanisms that explain how a base becomes a campaign, we work back from campaign to base, and seek explanations for the differential forms of the British and French anti-GMO campaigns by looking for the ‘cultural artefacts, memories, and traditions’ that characterise the ‘organizations, networks, participants’ that constitute the respective movements. Through paired comparison (Tarrow 2010), we thus seek answers to the question why ostensibly similar movement strategies in broadly similar institutional contexts have produced tangible tactical differences.

To do this, we suggest that the concept of *movement tradition* is an essential bridge between structural and cultural approaches for understanding tactical choice. Tradition has a long history as a concept in the social sciences. Although sometimes used to refer to an unchanging and even unreflexive acceptance of inherited forms of action (Giddens 1991), it is also open to other interpretations. For MacIntyre (1985: 222), living traditions are based on ‘continuities of conflict’: tradition requires an understanding of action in relation to time and cultural inheritance, but it does not forestall the prospect of modifying ideas and practices (see also Bevir 2000). Furthermore, tradition is maintained through practice; in this respect it can encompass one of Bourdieu’s most useful ideas regarding the familiar nature of social action (Crossley 2002: 176). For Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992), movement practices (such as forms of protest) become familiar to participants over time, becoming ‘second nature’ – just as when we play a sport, we do not have to plan every action, but know what to do, because we are used to it.

This is not to say that tactical choice is not intentional (Taylor & van Dyke 2004); rather, forms of action become routinized (in Bourdieusian terms) as part of the habitus of activist groups. There is a connection here with Tilly's (1995) 'repertoire of contention' of nationally-inscribed, familiar forms of protest; but by focusing on the 'modular' and shared national character of modern protest forms (Tarrow 1998: 29-42), the notion of repertoire takes us away from the relationship between specific kinds of action and movement ideas. Indeed, as Taylor argues, 'the array of collective actions that a movement develops to sustain itself should influence the goals and tactics adopted by the same movement in subsequent mass mobilizations' (1989: 771). We argue here that differences between the ways French and British activists have undertaken crop trashing – which would amount, in Tillyian terms, to the *same* repertoire – should be understood in terms of different activist traditions, each of which was over-determined by the relationship between national and movement traditions. In France, activists stage action as a demonstration of serious, responsible, collective Republican citizenship; in the UK, activists combine a sceptical view of legality developing from anarchist individualism with an explicitly non-threatening, playful, ethos.

Our argument first establishes the broad contours of the campaigns, before placing them (in PPT fashion) within their relevant structural contexts, highlighting the broad similarities between the two national contexts. We then examine the campaigns more closely, identifying their tactical, organizational, and ideological differences, before demonstrating how differences in social movement traditions can explain these differences. In the final section, we draw out our findings and their consequences for the study of movement action.

I Campaign Similarities...

The direct action campaigns against GM crops in Britain and France share a number of similarities. In both countries, activists have waged sustained campaigns of ecotage – the illegal, deliberate damaging or destruction of goods or services on account of their potentially harmful environmental effects in order to inflict prohibitive economic costs (Plows *et al* 2004) – against genetically-modified (GM) crops, whether targeting open field trials or (in France) plantations destined for market commercialization. Activists have destroyed crops in fields; they have destroyed grain in silos; and they have introduced conventional seed to GM seed to invalidate trials. They have also staged hunger strikes, blockaded ports, run consumer information campaigns, targeted food retailers, gained support from politicians and parts of the media not usually sympathetic to sabotage, and of course, lobbied government. Finally, in both countries, activists have been prosecuted numerous times for their participation in such actions, sometimes winning acquittals or discharges from the courts.

In both countries, anti-GMO direct action was launched in 1997 and has, by any yardstick, been successful. In the UK, crop trashing actions were initially organized by small groups of environmental radicals in 1996-97, covertly damaging a series of small field trials conducted by various agricultural institutes. These actions were barely reported beyond activist newsletters, but ecotage attracted increased media attention in spring 1998 when the covert nocturnal destruction of a field of GM sugar beet in Norfolk was followed four days later by the establishment of a public two-week protest camp (or ‘crop squat’) at the same site.¹ By the end of 1998, forty small crop trial sites had been reported as damaged, and a further seventy in 1999 (Thomas 2001: 340). A new phase of crop destruction took place as the Labour government established a larger ‘farm-scale’ trial programme in 1999. By the end of the trial

programme in 2003, activists claimed to have destroyed or damaged 91 of the 476 farm trials.ⁱⁱ

In March 2004, following the trials, the British government was prepared to grant a licence to Bayer for the commercial cultivation of its Chardon LL GM maize; however, Bayer responded by announcing that it would not seek such a licence in the UK. This followed several months of disruptive direct action in which more than 50 protests specifically targeted Bayer.ⁱⁱⁱ There has accordingly been no commercial cultivation of GM crops in the UK. Subsequent efforts to re-launch GMO trials at scientific research centres in 2007 and 2008 foundered in the face of renewed sabotage and direct action,^{iv} indicating the continuing, if less visible, presence of direct action networks.

In France, the ‘civic disobedience’ campaign of the *Faucheurs volontaires* was launched in 2003, providing national coordination for the previously somewhat sporadic and localized activism. Following an initial action in June 1997, direct action targeted various sites across the south of the country in 1998 and 1999, with actions primarily organized by José Bové and René Riesel, from the leftist *Confédération paysanne* (CP) peasant farmers’ union. In the face of growing public opposition to GMOs, successive conservative and *Gauche plurielle* governments produced a series of compromise solutions for commercial cultivation, with Lionel Jospin’s government endorsing the EU’s June 1999 five-year moratorium on the commercial licensing of GM crops (Roy & Joly 2000, de Raymond 2010: 299-304). Attacks on open field trials continued, however. In September 2003, 1400 scientists and researchers signed a petition expressing their frustration at the effectiveness of crop trashing, estimating that half of all field trials had been destroyed that summer. Since then, some 7000 activists have formally registered as *Faucheurs volontaires*. The four summers of 2004-2007 saw

almost continual direct action, with about half of all field trials destroyed each year. In 2007, French bio-tech conglomerate Limagrain announced that it would no longer pursue GMO research and development in France if crop destruction continued, and has since effectively moved its trial operations out of the European market altogether.^v

The *Faucheurs volontaires* campaign effectively placed GM technology at the top of the agricultural and environmental policy agendas in France. GMOs dominated President Sarkozy's pluralist policy consultations, the autumn 2007 *Grenelle de l'environnement*, and the spring 2008 parliamentary session which produced legislation on GM crop dissemination. On 11 January 2008, after nine days of an 'indefinite' hunger strike conducted by sixteen activists (including Bové), François Fillon's conservative government reluctantly agreed to honour its post-Grenelle commitment to suspend MON810's commercial licence, invoking the European Commission's 'safeguard clause'. There have been no new field trials in France since 2007; in 2008, activists destroyed each of Monsanto's five remaining pluri-annual trials. Most recently, a trial of GM vines at the (Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (INRA) research institute at Colmar was completely destroyed by activists in August 2010.

II ...and Political Opportunities

In the PPT tradition, the typical starting point for an analysis of these campaigns would be a comparison of the political opportunities in each polity, identifying similarities and differences in the structural contexts for each movement (Kriesi *et al* 1995; Meyer & Minkoff 2004; Tilly & Tarrow 2007; Johnston 2011). A first point to make in our cases is that, despite devolution within the UK and the regionalization of some important aspects of public policy-making in France (and, for both countries, the relevance of European and other international

institutions in key policy areas), in comparative terms both countries have been classified, albeit crudely, as ‘high capacity democracies’ (Tilly & Tarrow 2007: 57). Both remain broadly centralized states with strong executives, which are usually able to impose policy on other domestic actors. France is a ‘strong state with an exclusive dominant strategy’, where ‘challengers can be and are typically excluded from the political process’ (Kriesi *et al* 1995: 36); the French political-institutional context ‘invites movements to adopt disruptive, often violent strategies’ (Duyvendak 1995: 63). For Britain, Dryzek *et al* highlight the ‘extraordinary degree of centralization of power in the Westminster system’ (2003: 54), which they see as the key factor in the development of elite strategies of ‘active exclusion’ towards environmental movement actors following the election of the first Thatcher government in 1979.

Whilst there are differences in analysis and emphasis between observers, it is these kinds of regime – strong, centralized, exclusionary – that are most likely to produce contentious social movement activity, according to Tilly and Tarrow (2007: 57). Three further factors link Britain and France in these terms. First, regulation and policy-making in both countries takes place within a framework defined by the European Commission, with *commercial* licences granted on a European-wide basis; but where national governments and scientific agencies take authorization decisions for crop *trials*, and national governments remain key actors at the European level (Toke 2004: 158-66; Ansell *et al* 2006; Seifert 2009; Levidow & Carr 2010). Second, although public opinion in both countries has remained consistently hostile to GMOs (Gaskell *et al* 2006; van der Heijden 2010: 134), there is also a dominant consensus in agricultural policy communities in both countries in support of large-scale technological solutions to policy problems. Both the largest farming unions – the *Fédération nationale des*

syndicats d'exploitants agricoles (FNSEA) in France and the National Farmers' Union (NFU) in the UK – are strong supporters of GMOs.

Third, the controversy over GMOs is co-temporal in both countries with the election of centre-left governments, which may be seen as 'natural' allies of environmental movements (Kriesi *et al* 1995). Crop trashing began and gained prominence in both countries under centre-left governments whose environment ministers (Dominique Voynet in France and Michael Meacher in Britain) were broadly sympathetic to anti-GMO movements, but whose overall position was pro-GMO. In the UK, Prime minister Blair shifted his position during the course of his first administration (1997-2001) from initial wholehearted support for GMOs to a more tempered policy of evaluation through field trials, and finally to an acknowledgement of 'genuine and real concerns' as the scale of public opposition became increasingly clear (Blair 2002). In other words, as Seifert points out in his study of France, the governments of both countries sought to accommodate public opposition to GMOs (2009: 32). But in neither country has either accommodation or political incumbency had a demonstrable effect on the incidence of crop trashing. In France, where control of the legislature shifted to the right in 2002, governments of all colours have shown themselves vulnerable to anti-GMO campaigns.

In fact, on the key points outlined by Tarrow in his list of factors that constitute relevant political opportunities (1998: 76-85), we see broad similarity between the two countries in all of them (levels of direct institutional access, levels and patterns of state centralization, political alignments, the presence of divided elites and potential allies in power, and through the regulatory regime, identical international conditions). These arguments – the supranational EU regulatory regime but national governmental primacy; the concentration of ecotage in just two EU member states; the similarity of the 'configuration of power' (Kriesi *et al* 1995) –

therefore could help us explain why anti-GMO movements in these two cases resorted to direct action. But it does not help us understand how this direct action is carried out – or why there should be fundamental differences in tactical choice in each case. For this we need greater granularity, and an approach that combines a causal consideration of structural factors with attention to the dynamics and ideas within the movements themselves.

Our analysis of the debates within these movements draws from a variety of sources. We analysed the reports of action in national media and activist newsletters and we also drew from interview and observation material from two broader research projects that we had carried out separately on environmental protest movements in Britain and France. The initial research on Britain was in 2000-2002 and involved 58 biographical interviews with key activists and observation of meetings.^{vi} For the purposes of this article we carried out further work on Britain in 2010 analysing activist accounts of their actions in newsletters and online archives. We also carried out similar work on France, including eleven interviews with key informants, and attendance at activist meetings and trials.^{vii} Other than interviews, all activist sources cited are available publicly.

III Campaign Differences...

Tactics

The most obvious difference between the two campaigns is tactical. Operationally, the FV campaign advocates public, open, accountable, non-violent action, and constructs crop trashing as collective, mass, and media-oriented, with actions often publicized in advance, and activists only allowed to use their hands and feet to destroy crops. P., one of 58 activists who

trashed a field trial of Monsanto GM maize at Poinville, in the Eure-et-Loire, in August 2007, recounts:

We carried out the action at 7 in the morning, and the gendarmes were waiting for us. They knew there was going to be an action, so they came regularly to the field – it was the weekend – later they told us that they had been there since 2 in the morning. So we got there, and we just went ahead with it, we did everything very quickly, there were only ten or so gendarmes there, and they told us they didn't have the means to stop us. We gave them a list of all those involved, and afterwards we presented our identity cards to them, and they drew up their own list. We asked them if we could go on to a second action – in fact, take the maize we'd pulled up and leave it at a Monsanto factory about 3 kilometres away – and because they couldn't stop us, they simply asked us to snap the maize stalks in half and remove the pollen grains – the theme of our action was contamination. I think a couple of the gendarmes even helped us.^{viii}

Not all action in France has been so overt. There was significant covert action in 2006 and 2007, and serious police repression of public action (as at Solomiac in September 2004) clearly had some effect; as one activist put it, 'we're not trying to commit suicide, after all'.^{ix} Yet on the whole the FV campaign has sought to marry openness with effectiveness; even where, as at the INRA Colmar action, crop trashing took place in the early hours (at 5 am), activists then called the press and submitted to arrest, stressing that they had acted non-violently, 'unmasked and openly [*à visage découvert*], taking responsibility for their action', as Bové put it.^x

In the UK, there have been two main modes of action. Covert tactics have been predominant: ‘most site decontaminations, happened at night’,^{xi} with activists aiming to destroy as much of trial crop as possible before leaving the site without detection. There were very few arrests for this type of action, and no prison sentences (suspended or otherwise). Covert action was rejected, however, by the genetiX snowball (gXs) campaign, launched on 4 July 1998 when six activists carried out a public action against a Monsanto crop trial, symbolically claiming independence from US corporations. gXs revived a peace movement repertoire from the 1980s, in which the aim was for as many people as possible to take symbolic and public action leading to arrest and trial, in order to challenge the legitimacy and legality of government policy. In one way this was successful: crop trashers were prosecuted and convicted in only two cases in England and Wales, both for what gXs termed ‘accountable action’. Others had cases dropped, and the penalties for those convicted were only small fines. This was a much more encouraging environment than in France, where there were numerous convictions and substantial fines or suspended prison sentences, particularly for recidivist crop trashers.^{xii} But in other ways the gXs strategy failed: very few of the 1,000 who pledged to take action took part, and fewer still were tried. Initial gXS actions involved only a handful of participants, ‘who were tied up in injunctions’ from Monsanto and others and so became focused on court cases. As one activist commented:

with Snowball because they needed to make actions happen and I know I’m saying this with hindsight, they needed to have thousands of people pulling up crops on 20, 30 actions and it wasn’t happening, the thing is they would never have destroyed the whole crop of any one of them and there was treading on the toes of people going covertly doing stuff.^{xiii}

Organization

The differences in tactics are reflected in differences in the organizations and organizational structures which support the campaigns. The FV campaign was premised upon the acceptance of personal and collective accountability for the deliberate destruction of property.

Organizationally, the campaign provided national leadership and coordination for the multiple groups engaged in activism. Alongside the CP, the most prominent are Greenpeace France, ATTAC, and various environmental and organic farming organizations; the leaders of the main organizations involved are in continuous personal or telephone contact. Faucheurs join the campaign by signing a formal charter, committing them to non-violent methods of civil disobedience (Les Faucheurs volontaires 2004); there is a decentralized federal structure, with an annual national general assembly to discuss ideas, strategies, and objectives, at which decisions are taken by consensus. The campaign also provides legal support for the numerous trials faced by activists, and a framework for fundraising to share the costs of legal actions and fines. Beyond the destruction of crops themselves, this is therefore a collective, explicit campaign designed to gain media attention, overtly politicize the debate, and fight multiple prosecutions. In fact, according to Michel Dupont, one of the CP's former campaign directors on GMOs, one of the benefits of fighting prosecutions as a campaign is that it obliged the organizations involved to work out a common platform and justification for their action.^{xiv}

In the UK, there was no comparably formalized campaign. In both countries direct action against GMOs was only one part of a broader campaign in which NGOs, independent scientists, and consumer groups lobbied government, biotech corporations, and food producers, and engaged in public information campaigns. In Britain the only groups with the experience and confidence to carry out crop sabotage were the small locally-based groups of

mainly young anarchistic activists who had carried out the wave of direct action against road building in the preceding six years (Wall 1999); small-scale sabotage (or ‘pixieing’ as activists called it) was a regular feature of this earlier campaign, and thus already part of their repertoire (Plows *et al* 2004; Wall 2000). And when the GM issue became prominent in the late 1990s, these direct action networks already had an established structure, based on local affinity groups. Although they were loosely grouped under the banner of Earth First!, other than a monthly newsletter which reported actions, and twice-yearly national gatherings to network and discuss strategy, there was no formal membership, no bureaucracy, no staff, and no public leadership. Many of these groups did not use the Earth First! name, and multiple groups overlapped. One such was the Genetic Engineering Network (GEN), which published a bi-monthly newsletter, *GenetiX Update*, and provided a forum for exchanging information and reporting actions. Along with other NGOs, Greenpeace had supported the establishment of GEN in 1997, and both Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth sent campaigners to the major genetics strategy meeting that GEN organized, mainly for Earth First!ers, in April 1997 (Thomas 2001: 339).^{xv} While there was occasional contact, there was no strategic coordination between the NGOs and those involved in crop trashing, in contrast to France.

In addition to the anarchistic direct action networks, there were also residents living near crop trials who were not part of the direct action movement but who took part in local anti-GMO campaigns. A small number of these, some of whom were themselves already active in other (mainly conventional) environmental groups, took part in public, symbolic crop trashing at Weymouth, Darlington, Colchester, Munloch, and Watlington in 1999-2001, often in conjunction with experienced direct activists. The other major actor in the anti-GMO protests was Greenpeace UK, which had taken the lead earlier in the 1990s in co-ordinating a lobbying campaign of environmentalists, organic farmers, and consumer groups. Compared to the

direct action groups, Greenpeace was much less involved in protest, but it undertook a single public crop trash at Lyng in Norfolk in 1999, which led to two jury trials and subsequent acquittals for the 28 Greenpeace participants, including Peter Melchett, the Greenpeace Executive Director.^{xvi} This single action received more public attention than any other crop trashes, not least because Greenpeace's actions were designed to maximise media coverage. However, it also caused significant tensions within anti-GMO networks in the UK (with gXs in particular, which had also planned to target the site, and which Greenpeace had not consulted),^{xvii} and within Greenpeace internationally (as other national groups, particularly in the South, felt that it compromised their commitment to non-violence).^{xviii} Outside Greenpeace, British direct activists were divided over media coverage, and unwilling to nominate spokespersons because it would undermine their anti-hierarchical commitments. The prevailing view was that each activist could only speak for themselves as an individual, not for their group.

State Legitimacy

A third difference between the British and French campaigns concerns the way that activists have understood and positioned their action ideologically with respect to the state. In France, the CP in particular articulated their action within what Heller (2002) terms a 'post-risk' framework. Whilst questions of human and environmental health remain important to the Faucheurs campaign, the CP in particular has broadened the movement analysis of GMOs to questions of patenting, industrialized agriculture, neoliberal globalization, and the confiscation of peasants' land and rights by transnational biotech, in France as in the global south. As a resistance to 'the subjugation of agriculture to an industrial lobby and the attendant loss of the diversity of our landscapes and crops' (Les Faucheurs volontaires 2006),

the FV campaign is thus positioned as a *citizen's movement*, defending the collective public interest against the private profits of biotech. Crop trashing was undertaken not to challenge the legitimacy of the state, but to demand it *intervene* further to take responsibility for public protection (de Raymond 2010: 314); the point of crop trashing, according to the campaign, is to enable the law to evolve. One activist demanding prosecution for the destruction of a field trial of MON810 x NK608 at Valdivienne, in August 2008, put it this way:

as a matter of conscience, if the law is unjust then I cannot do anything other than act, non-violently and *à visage découvert*, collectively, to improve the law.^{xix}

This overt respect for the legitimacy of state institutions, and demand for greater state intervention through regulation, is also reflected in an increasing dynamic of institutionalization of the campaign. Granted, the FV campaign itself cannot be institutionalized, as it has no recognized legal statutory basis *per se*; but movement leaders were formally received by Fillon's environment minister Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet at the end of July 2007; Bové publicly (and controversially within the environmental movement) endorsed the Grenelle's conclusions.^{xx} Dupont underscores that the work undertaken by the CP on amendments to the 2008 parliamentary bill on GMOs testifies to its willingness to play a constructive role, and argues that it is work that the CP would have been unlikely to carry out even two years previously.^{xxi} When a hundred or so activists (including Bové) destroyed the field trial at Valdivienne in 2008, it was, for the first time for a crop trash in France, not followed by a government communiqué condemning the action.

If the British anti-GM networks were much more fragmented than those in France, they were also articulated around very different conceptions of collective action and accountability. As

discussed above, British crop trashers were divided between advocates of ‘accountable action’ in gXs and some local anti-GMO campaigns on the one hand, and of covert ‘pixieing’, or ‘night-time gardening’ (Thomas 2001: 340) on the other, with the majority of the environmental direct action ‘affinity groups’ placing themselves in this latter group. At stake here was not just arguments over the conduct or effectiveness of action, but over the meaning of the conduct of action. Activists crystallising around EF! shared a similar conception of their action as foremost anti-capitalist and anti-statist, but did not share gXs’ emphasis on the nature of public responsibility. Whilst this may seem to connect gXs with the Faucheurs campaign, gXs articulated a very different analysis of state legitimacy, anchored in an anarchistic individualism.

In the UK, this led to heated debates between the two camps. For example, in a text that was debated at the Earth First! Summer Gathering in 1998, Rowan Tilly of gXs was obliged to distinguish her sense of accountability from liberal forms of civil disobedience. Tilly tried to show to others in the environmental direct action movement that the ‘accountability’ of the gXs campaign, and thus its acceptance of arrest, did not mean that gXs also accepted the legitimacy of state judicial institutions (1998). She thus argued that arrest and prosecution should be seen purely as a productive tactic for generating resistance, not as an endorsement of the state. But critics from the direct action networks countered by pointing out that gXs also demanded a five-year moratorium on GM crops and a government-sponsored review. For EF! activists, gXs was therefore implicitly endorsing the power of the state and corporations to manage society:

It is our view that resistance does not need to legitimise itself according to the terms of the system and its ideology. It is legitimate precisely because it resists these things.

Genetix Snowball, in contrast to this, does not contextualise itself within capitalism or the resistance to it. It is therefore forced to justify itself by emphasising its ultra non-violence and accountability and the moderation and "reasonable"ness of it's demands. A case of fuck the disobedient lets get civil. genetiX snowball is not resistance but souped up civil disobedience, spectacular lobbying, and therefore shoots itself in the foot. (Leeds Earth First! 1998)

IV ...and Movement Traditions

In France, therefore, we have a public, open, citizens' movement, with a formally (if loosely) organized coalition of actors able to integrate their (sometimes contrasting) analyses of GMOs into a single campaign. In Britain, however, we have considerable opposition between activists over tactics, with low formalization, little sign of integration or coordination, and a marked preponderance of unclaimed, poorly mediatized covert action. How can we account for these differences? A classical structural reading, in the PPT mould, is of little use to us here; whilst it might be able to emphasise what France and the UK have in common, it seems ill-equipped to explain what differentiates the tactical and organizational choices that characterise these campaigns. Seeking an answer, we need to work back from the visible to the latent, or in Tilly and Tarrow's terms, from campaign to base. In particular, this means looking at how movement networks inscribe their action within 'frameworks of meaning' and, in particular, how they mobilize differential traditions of activism.

France

One of the key differences between the French and British campaigns was the presence in France of a lead agricultural actor in the CP.^{xxii} The CP provides a radical, anti-productivist alternative to the managerial, agri-business orientation of the conservative FNSEA. Its repertoire of actions positions it in classic ‘thresholder strategy’ terms (Maloney *et al* 1994): on the one hand, spectacular, mediatized, non-violent actions, aiming to make up for its minority electoral position by appealing directly to public opinion, while differentiating itself from the more violent traditions of the FNSEA; on the other, lobbying and attempts to increase its professional representativity (Bruneau 2001: 26). Yet if this perhaps explains its opposition to GMOs (leftism, counter-globalization, defence of small farmers, promotion of organic alternatives, willingness to engage in and history of direct action), this does not adequately explain the specific contours of the FV actions themselves. To understand this, we need to examine the *negotiation* of collective identity over citizenship, disobedience, and public legitimacy within the construction of the campaign.

The FV campaign explicitly places itself within a national tradition of active Republican citizenship. This is made in three ways: first, by the references to past actions of disobedience by figures such as De Gaulle and Mitterrand (as articulated, for example, by Greens Alan Alpern and Dominique Plancke on trial at Lille in September 2005);^{xxiii} second, through claims of a right to insurgency as provided by the Revolutionary constitution of 1793 (to be precise, article 35 of the *Déclaration des droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen* which prefaces the *Constitution de l’An I* of 24 June 1793); third, through an explicit appeal to the higher principle of protecting the general interest. The second point is that disobedience is positioned not as civil, but as *civic* (as posited by Bové & Luneau, 2004). As we have argued elsewhere (Hayes 2007), this discursive shift both elides a central ethical problem over the (debateable) non-violence of crop trashing, and reinforces its positioning as an enactment of Republican

citizenship. In other words, the inscription of the movement within a (national) tradition is not ‘natural’ or ‘given’, but is produced by the practice of the movement itself.

The third point is that the *Faucheurs volontaires* continues to support state action, as outlined above, but also that it therefore continues to support public research on GMOs undertaken within the laboratory (*Faucheurs volontaires* 2006). To grasp why this distinction is important, we need to go back to one of the fundamental splits in the nascent campaign, between Bové and Riesel, immediately prior to the launch of the *Faucheurs volontaires*. There is nothing inevitable about anti-GMO direct action being articulated as a citizens’ campaign. Riesel, who, like Bové, had been active in one of the emblematic French social movement campaigns of the 1970s, which pitted peasant farmers against the state’s unilateral decision to expand a military base on the Larzac plateau in south-west France, was and remains highly critical of strategies which place their faith in the state’s capacity to regulate, and has remained a champion of covert, nocturnal, anti-statist action. For Bonneuil (2010: 239-44), this is not simply a question of divergent analyses of the state, however, but of divergent inscriptions within majority and minority movement traditions: the ‘Rieselien’, anarcho-syndicalist action inscribes itself in a covert Luddite tradition which has had little purchase in France.

Britain

In Britain, there is no such split in agricultural representation: there, the NFU (National Farmers’ Union) remains the only major national representative organization for farmers. Historically close to the Ministry of Agriculture (now absorbed into the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, DEFRA), it has consistently adopted pro-GMO

positions, and provided few opportunities for the development of more critical reasoning on gene technology. Thus whilst some organic farmers and small farmers' groups (such as the Farmers' Union of Wales) spoke out against GMOs, no major organized group spoke out against genetic modification from within the agricultural community. In the UK, battle was therefore drawn between environmentalists of different kinds on one side, and transnational corporations on the other.

If one of the limitations of the British networks was the inability to agree a common position, this was one legacy of the longer roots of this kind of activism in social movements of the 1970s and 1980s which gave priority to individual conscience over group discipline and formal decision-making – explaining the very loose forms of organization they adopted. The anarchistic ideas that were dominant among environmental direct action groups had been developed from what Roseneil (2001: 95), referring to the women's peace camp at the Greenham Common US Air Force base in Berkshire in the 1980s, calls

a legacy of anti-establishment attitudes, a strong strand of anarchist hostility to hierarchies, a critique of the materialism of industrial societies and of representative forms of democracy and the state, and a belief in the legitimacy and necessity of non-parliamentary forms of action.

Roseneil also contrasts the playful and irreverent tone of action at Greenham with the serious and doctrinal character of 1970s British feminism. As in France, activists from previous movements such as the peace movement and left direct action groups were present in the British environmental direct action networks (Wall 1999; Doherty 2002), so this broader

tradition preceded and shaped the way in which the issue of GMOs was understood; it also shaped the tone of their actions.

British activists did not have an equivalent tradition to French Republicanism to evoke and, aware that their countercultural ethos was off-putting to many, tried to overcome this barrier. gXs participants made a deliberate effort to present themselves as conventional and unthreatening, which helped them gain over 1,000 supporters, including MPs and celebrities.^{xxiv} For the British covert activists, a press release reporting their action was the only communicative option available. That they chose to use humour is evidence of their interest in connecting with an audience (Anon A, n.d.). Covert activists in Fife left large X-shapes in the fields where they had destroyed crops, and the press release was a message from aliens, evoking both the *X-Files* television series about extra-terrestrials, and the long-running debate in the 1990s about what caused crop circles to appear. A co-ordinated attack on up to nine sites in one night in June 1999 was attributed to ‘Ambridge Against Genetics’, a reference to the BBC radio soap opera *The Archers*, which was running a story about a crop trash at the time. On public actions such as occupations of Monsanto offices, activists dressed as ‘genetically-modified super-heroes’, pantomime cows, set up a 10 metre inflatable pink castle, and in one case played the theme music from *Mission: Impossible* to carry out their crop destruction.

This playfulness was not specific to GMOs, and had also characterized anti-roads protests by the same groups in the 1990s, as well as Greenham Common women’s peace camp in the 1980s. Activists felt that this ethos undermined aggressive and violent responses. As Seb Kelly of GEN commented: ‘It is completely non-violent and non-confrontational [...] It’s all very British in fact’.^{xxv} On the whole, covert activists sought to balance their covert crop

trashing with a continued commitment to public campaigning. This was partly instrumental: they did not want to risk losing the support of the public, or invite major repression (Plows *et al* 2004), but a playful ethos was also seen as appropriate for an individualist network that deliberately avoided having a doctrinal party-line.

The contrast with French actions is striking. In France, playfulness has been rare. In one action, a month before the Poinville crop trash, activists held a show-trial of bees, accusing them of cross-pollenization:

So we set up a show trial of bees. I was one of the lawyers, F. was the judge, one of our mates caught the wind with a potato sack, as it was an accomplice. It was surreal, doing that in front of the gendarmes. When we left, a helicopter followed us, armoured vehicles too.

But what was good, was that we had the tv and journalists with us, and the two local papers talked about it for two weeks, which let us talk about it, tell people that there were GMOs in the fields, here in the Loiret. But generally we don't do things like that – we're a citizen's movement, so we don't dress up or disguise ourselves or anything.^{xxvi}

Conversely, there was no sense in Britain of action as a demonstration of collective citizenship that was so important to French debates and practice.

Conclusions

In comparing anti-GMO crop trashing in Britain and France we have seen that similar macro-structural contexts can explain the *occurrence* of direct action, but not its *form* or consequently its wider meaning as a political act. Relations with political institutions and competition with other actors can take us some way in explaining the actions of the CP, determined as it was to maintain its niche as distinct from the larger FNSEA, and to retain ties with government. In contrast in Britain anti-GMO crop trashing was carried out by a network that was outside political institutions; it lacked the meso-level sectoral opportunities available to the CP. Thus, analysis of political institutions and relations with the state can take us some of the way towards explanation, but only some.

But in each case we can also see evidence that traditions that have developed in specific movement-organizational contexts have shaped action. In France, the leftist tradition of civic Republicanism explained the commitment to public and accountable actions that made the courts a useful venue for strategic engagement, while collectivism explains the commitment to disciplined rules for crop trashing. In Britain, the (at best) ambivalent attitude among activists to the legitimacy of political institutions meant that the option of court prosecutions was eschewed for covert action (even those in gXs who preferred ‘accountable’ actions distinguished their position from ‘civil’ disobedience), and their individualism meant there was none of the collective discipline that characterized the FV campaign. But at the same time even the covert actions were self-limiting and drew on a tradition of playfulness that was already established in British direct action networks.

If both structure and culture have a role to play in a full explanation of the form of social movement mobilization, what therefore is the specific purchase of the concept of tradition? As we noted, both PPT scholars and its critics have seen structure (in the form of political

institutions) and culture (in terms of the meanings and interpretations given to action by participants) as necessary elements; the problem lies in their combination and balance. At present, tradition is a background presence in these debates. For Tilly and Tarrow, it is part of the movement base, while advocates of a cultural approach recognise the importance of 'ideological traditions' to movements (Polletta & Ho 2006: 195). Bringing tradition to the foreground is worthwhile, we believe, because it can do conceptual work that other widely used cultural concepts cannot. Ideology, for example, is often argued to be in an awkward relationship with movement ideas because, in its descriptive form, it refers to a more systematic, coherent and therefore abstract and ideal-type set of normative ideas than is usually found in empirically observable movements (Westby 2002; Polletta & Ho 2006; Gillan 2008). The most influential alternative is the framing perspective, a communicational process whereby movement actors seek to identify and define issues in order to mobilise activists with different ideologies and legitimise struggle (Gamson 1992, Oliver & Johnston 2000); however, this perspective seems less appropriate for understanding why activists believe what they do (Gillan 2008), or how they construct meanings through action. Similarly, collective identity entails the subjective recognition of a common bond between fellow activists, but this may mean only the most general shared worldview (Saunders 2008).

Tradition complements these principally as a bridging concept. Its openness, malleability, and flexibility, is in this sense its virtue. Bevir's work on intellectual and ideological traditions emphasises the diversity of ideas that can co-exist within a tradition, and the consequent importance of conflict through which traditions develop and change (Bevir 2000). We believe similar arguments can be made about how social movement actors construct repertoires of practice; indeed, one of Hobsbawm's key arguments in his landmark work on the 'invention of tradition' (1983) is the centrality of the processes of negotiation, performance and

repetition to its construction and maintenance. Above all, an emphasis on tradition introduces an important temporal dimension to understanding movements, linking PPT insights that repertoires draw on pre-existing forms of action (Tilly 1995) and that most new movements begin as spin-offs from existing activist networks (McAdam 1995) with the idea that movements seek to understand the past and serve as cultural laboratories for new social and political ideas (Melucci 1996). By combining the recognition of cultural inheritance with the values, interpretive schema, and practices that constitute its content, the concept of activist tradition helps give weight to the cultural dimension of movements. It also shows us where to begin our search for explanations of protest forms when political opportunities are not enough.

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Notes

ⁱ 'Carnival Feel to Genetic Protest', *The Guardian*, 25 May 1998; 'Sowing New Seeds of Dissent', *The Observer*, 13 June 1998.

ⁱⁱ 'Where have all the trials gone?', *Genetix Update*, 26, Spring 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Bayer Pull Own Crops', *Genetix Update*, 25, Winter 2003/04.

^{iv} 'BASF execs locked out in GM Protest', *Earth First! Action Update*, May 2008; 'GM researcher despairs as three years' work destroyed', *Times Higher Education*, 7 August 2008.

^v 'Le Grenelle de l'Environnement doit être à l'écoute de Tous les acteurs', Limagrain communiqué de presse, 2 July 2007; 'Limagrain renonce à expérimenter ses maïs transgéniques en France', *Le Monde*, 20 May 2008.

^{vi} Economic and Social Research Council ('Radical Participation'); Award no. L215252034. The author are grateful for the contribution of Alexandra Plows and Derek Wall, who worked as researchers on this project and carried out some of the interviews cited here.

^{vii} European Commission's Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowship scheme (Collective Action and Memory in the French Environmental Movement). Proposal n° 251812.

^{viii} Interview May 2011. All 58 activists later stood trial at Chartres for the action, receiving a discharge; they were subsequently convicted on appeal.

^{ix} J., interview, Malakoff, March 2007.

^x '70 pieds de vigne transgénique saccagés à Colmar', *France Info*, 15 August 2010.

^{xi} 'Bashing the GE-nie Back in the Bottle' *Do or Die* 9, 2001, p.25. On the predominance of covert action, see also Anon b (2003: 43) and Thomas (2001: 340-41).

^{xii} Bové served 42 days in prison in summer 2003 for his part in the destruction of transgenic rice at a public research facility in Montpellier in 1999, on top of the 44 days served the previous summer for his part in the dismantling of a McDonald's fast food restaurant in Millau, an action which also took place in summer 1999. The latter prison sentence was commuted by President Chirac.

^{xiii} Interview with UK anti-Genetics activist, Derbyshire, April 2002.

^{xiv} Interview, Paris, February 2009.

^{xv} Interview with UK Genetics activist, Oxford, November 2000.

^{xvi} 'Greenpeace wins key GMO case', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2000.

^{xvii} 'It's snowball Jim, but not as we know it', *genetiX snowball Newsletter*, 2, October 1999.

^{xviii} Interview with a member of staff at Greenpeace UK, June 2009; interview with campaign director, Greenpeace France, Paris, June 2009. This may explain why Greenpeace did not engage in a sustained crop trashing campaign in the UK.

^{xix} D., giving evidence before the court at Poitiers, 14 June 2011.

^{xx} ‘Pour le leader altermondialiste les déclarations de Nicolas Sarkozy sur les OGM vont «dans le bon sens»’, *Libération*, 26 October 2007.

^{xxi} Interview, Paris, February 2009.

^{xxii} A PPT reading might, justifiably, argue that this is the result of differential sectoral opportunities (see Hayes 2002) between Britain and France; Seifert (2009), for instance, argues that similar ‘policy specific contextual factors’ explain differences in the pattern of farmers’ mobilizations against GMOs in Austria and France.

^{xxiii} Trial of the ‘Onze d’Avelin’, Lille, 29 September 2005.

^{xxiv} Including Prince Charles; see ‘Do I look like an anarchist weirdo hippie?’, *The Observer*, 6 June 1999.

^{xxv} ‘First Blood to Anti-GM Activists’, *The Guardian*, 1 June 1999.

^{xxvi} P., FV activist, interview, May 2011.