
Sivens: The removal of the French territory by means of planning and development.

Philippe Pelletier -Université Lyon 2

What has been going on for the last two years in the Tescou valley over the Sivens (Tarn) dam project, and which has suddenly gathered speed with the death of a young opponent on October 26, 2014 following a nocturnal charge by the police, again dramatically illustrates the removal of territory by means of planning and development that is currently taking place in France. At the same time – and this is no coincidence – the highest authorities are finalizing two major worksites with extreme geographic implications. On the one hand, we have Prime Minister Manuel Valls' commitment of €1.4 billion of government money for the Greater Paris transit system. On the other, we have territorial land reform concerning the regrouping of the Regions, also confirmed by Valls, which was approved by France's National Assembly on December 9, 2014.

Brutal top-down process

The top-down process, by way of local political bosses, characterizes what is going on in Sivens just as it did for the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport project (see the article by A.L. Pailloux also in this issue). After having convinced their general council, a handful of local elected officials supported by a lobbying group – manufacturing companies supported by a major ruthless national developer on the one hand, and a few farmers declaring that they have no water on the other – forced through a project and a dam.

Their opponents, often well informed, well equipped and knowing the right questions to ask, are looked down on. And when the protests take a tough stance, locally and nationally exposing the uselessness of these major concrete-gobbling projects and sweetheart deals, might makes right.

Political manoeuvres are also discovered. The briefly-serving Minister of Ecology (from June 2012 to July 2013), Delphine Batho, had blocked the Sivens dam project¹. On the other hand, authorizations flowed freely from her successor, Philippe Martin, a former chief of police and socialist chairman of the Gers general council in the neighbouring department of Tarn, probably to protect his political rear in the region. As for Manuel Valls, he is attempting to foster a tougher image than his predecessor, Jean-Marc Ayrault, to achieve in Sivens what couldn't be done in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, namely, end the protests. According to Philippe Maffre, a farmer in Montans (Tarn) and a member of the *Confédération paysanne* "[tr.] Don't forget that he was the one who in early September, gave assurances in front of young European farmers that the project would go ahead. He made a commitment to this issue, undoubtedly to please his audience. But the message was clear, just as it came through loud and clear that from then on force would be used in trying to get compliance with this decision".²

Indeed, all the testimonials are in agreement that since September, the controlling forces have toughened their interventions against the protesters in Sivens, and according to certain reports, even more vigorously than in Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

Productivism or threatened constitutional state?

The day after the death of Rémi Fraise marked the timely delivery of a report ordered by the current ecology minister, Ségolène Royal. Its findings were that the dam project (1.5 million m³) is disproportionate to the needs. Meanwhile, the demand for both irrigation and water purification has apparently gone down following a decrease in the number of farmers (forty or so at the most) and the environmentally-friendly equipment of two facilities (a dairy cooperative and modernization of a water purification plant)³.

An elected ecologist like Yves Jadot however discusses the confusion on the nature of this type of project, stating that "[tr.] When it's a matter of preserving the world of

¹ « Sivens, barrage à contretemps », *Libération*, October 30, 2014.

² *L'Humanité*, October 30, 2014, p. 12.

³ Xardel Victoria, Berlan Aurélien (2014) : « À Sivens, après les arbres, un homme ». *Libération*, October 29, 2014.

yesterday, collusions between productivist and political interests appear to have a significant influence"⁴. Productivism? What is it, really? In this case, productivism is understood as a system where we *produce in order to produce* while, in reality, the current capitalist system *produces in order to sell*. There is a not-so-slight difference. Better yet: this clarification highlights the fact that present-day society is based on economic exploitation (extortion of the added-value or a windfall through wage earners and their boss, the State) and on commercial exchange (not the simple game of supply and demand, but the asymmetrical manipulation of the market). *Capitalistic agro-industry* or *agro-industrial capitalism* would be more correct than *productivism*, but this is probably a case of "big words" for *capitalism*.

So, one must wonder what is really at stake in Sivens: the interest of a few corn farmers or indeed, the State's authority, the ultimate expression of local communities, which has a monopoly on legitimate violence? Doesn't it have to suppress all social forces likely to protest against it?

The previous violence of the *Bonnets rouges* movement in Brittany, which is physically, numerically and symbolically much greater than the violence of the demonstrators in Sivens, did not attract the same repression because basically, they are not protesting against the system. To the contrary, they are participating through their network of both right- and left-wing elected officials, through the agro-food industry in Brittany which is huge, polluting and focussed on export, and its resulting transportation by truck on free highways funded by all the French taxpayers whether in Navarre, Corsica or Alsace.

A social issue

The argument that "European funds released have to be used for the project or we'll lose everything" looks more like a bureaucratic sob story than a genuine desire to develop land... But for whom?

As in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the protest in Sivens triggers common aspirations against a market-and-concrete society; these aspirations, however, are different in sociological composition and political strategy. Nonetheless, the matter should not

⁴ *Libération*, October 29, 2014, p. 5.

be reduced to a clash between local reformist ecologists and aggressive anarchist outsiders, nor even between the violent and non-violent, a distinction – made by authorities, mainstream media and non-violent Christians – which sugar-coats other more structural forms of violence (expropriation, dispossession, capital reducing everything...). The situation is more complex than that.

As a whole, these types of resistance convey something that is distinctly French. While in other countries new social movements like “Indignados” [tr. indignant] or “Occupy” take possession of a metropolitan public place (Wall Street, Madrid, Istanbul, Cairo, Hong Kong, etc.), or even a politically significant place (like the Taiwanese parliament occupied by “Indignants” for a number of days, an occurrence that passed unnoticed in the French media), this is not the case in France, despite a number of attempts.

In contrast, the protest developed in rural zones, somewhat like years ago in the Larzac or in Plogoff, which moreover are all similar. Even the Susa Valley situation in the Piedmont region of Italy, where a major movement against construction of the Lyon-Turin TGV line continues (*No TAV*), is geographically different because it involves a still-lively area combining the rural and urban, farming, manufacturing and tourism.

Of course, according to the watchword taken up by most of the opponents, “there are no local struggles” because the fate of the Planet, actually the fate of Humanity, to use eco-speak, is allegedly what is at stake. But under-estimating local territoriality raises strategic questions because who can be counted on to carry out the struggle? Nomadic “Zadists”? Local residents? Or both? But under what conditions and how will they be interrelated? Again, habitation and land ownership is the question, just as at the time of the First International.

The difficulty, and the issue, both lie in the joining of local rural/peasant residents and young city-dwellers or former city-dwellers who have come from away in a sort of hybrid return to their roots, which in the past has been more mobile than sustainable; only time will tell. On the other hand, at least some of their immigrant-origin suburban peers are seemingly more inclined to participate in jihad in West Asia than to join with these young neo-rural city people in the country near Nantes,

Tarn, or soon, Isère (protests against an amusement park project in Royon). But what brings them together is a French society dominated by unemployment and the consumerist anguish offering them no prospects to look forward to.

About the Author: Philippe Pelletier – Lyon 2 University

To quote this article: Philippe Pelletier, "Sivens: The removal of the French territory by means of planning and development" *justice spatiale | spatial justice*, n° 7 janvier 2015, <http://www.jssj.org>