

## **Sivens: when dialogue breaks down. The making of a tragedy**

Marie-Pierre Bès, Lecturer and Authorised Thesis Supervisor in socio-economics

Frédérique Blot, Lecturer in geography

Pascal Ducournau, Lecturer and Authorised Thesis Supervisor in sociology<sup>1</sup>

Translation: John Crisp

It took the death of a young environmental activist on the night of 25-26 October 2014 for a truce to be called in the implementation of the so-called "Sivens dam" project. The repeated demands for a public debate, the hunger strikes, the sit-ins, had achieved nothing. The law seemed to be on the side of the water resource operators for the Adour-Garonne basin, and in their view legitimised their political choices: *"The lights are all green, why should we turn back? And risk losing European funding? We can't take the chance"* (an elected General Council official at the Tarn River Festival in Rabastens, 12 September 2014). Yet the resurgence of these movements of resistance to development projects, interpreted as a new rule but also as places where contemporary social dynamics are played out (SUBRA, 2008; RIPOLL, VESCHAMBRE, 2005; PAILLOUX, 2015), could be of interest to institutions wanting to understand where the world is going. Why reject debate, open discussion between politicians and opponents, when this is the clearest form of non-violent opposition?

Quite apart from the financial deadlines, the multiple differences between the stakeholders, in their attitudes to "water resources", to the world and, more broadly, to "life", cast light on the sociotechnical conflict provoked by the Sivens Dam project. Moreover, this incompatibility helps to reveal the context in which the death of a young demonstrator occurred, as if the groundwork for that death had already been laid in the forms that the conflict had taken.

It took place in the area that its defenders call a Zone to Defend (Zone A Défendre, the ZAD du Testet), a play on the ultra-bureaucratic "Future Development Zone" (zone d'aménagement différé – ZAD), an acronym that refers to areas over which municipalities enjoy a so-called "pre-emptive right" to "implement an urban project, a local housing policy, to organise the maintenance, extension or introduction of economic activities, to promote the development of leisure and tourism, to build public amenities or research or higher education premises, to combat urban blight or foster urban regeneration, to protect or enhance built or unbuilt heritage and natural areas", [according to Article L.300-1 of the urban planning code](#). In autumn 2013, several activists decided to conduct a sit-in in order to oppose the construction of the Testet Dam. They occupied an area close to the first dam works, notably near a wall under construction and the deforestation area around Tescou. This choice of spatial location was interesting. It was neither in the mid-sized towns nearby (Gaillac, Rabastens, Albi, Montauban), between 10 and 40 km away, nor in the closest city (Toulouse, 55 km away), and was itself described as a ZAD, like that of Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

The intention here is neither to challenge the geographical descriptions used by the parties involved, nor even to question the legitimacy of the location, but to take at face value the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a joint production: the individual authors are therefore listed in alphabetical order.

definitions applied by the stakeholders. In so far as opponents of the dam identify as participants in the Sivens or Testet ZAD or as “zadistes”, we accept this as a social reality.

In this article, we will employ various notes and field interviews that we have accumulated since 2011 on the progress both of the dam project itself and of the protest it aroused. As researchers working in the fields of water management, the sociology of science and incidentally the sociology of social movements, but also as three people who live near the Sivens site, we became aware of this issue fairly early on and had several opportunities to talk to some of the project’s promoters as well as the leading opposition figures, and both to observe and take part in the demonstrations held. One or two of us, in particular, were able to make observations at numerous public meetings of the Testet Collective, from 2012 in Isle-sur-Tarn, Rabastens or Gaillac (81), during weekends at the ZAD de Sivens in spring and autumn 2014, through the collection of tracts and writings distributed by the opponents since 2012, but also through personal acquaintance with many people involved in the affair, which enabled us to collect expressions of justification, exasperation or confidence. Being a participant-observer, immersed in one’s terrain of enquiry, is often seen as an excellent way of acquiring direct access to the practices and representations of the groups under consideration. Performing this role generally requires a minimum degree of empathy – an understanding approach – with the people concerned, which was the case for us. This position gives our analyses a tone that may seem “politically aligned”, but we took care to obtain the views of people both unfavourable and favourable to the dam project.

We show that this conflict embodies not only a clash in attitudes to aquatic ecosystems, but also a clash in attitudes to the world and to life. A conflict which, in this context, has prompted a fragile alliance between two long-standing forms of activism, described here as “documentary” and “occupation” activism. The tension aroused by the sit-in and by the widening gulf between the protagonists escalated to reach the ultimate form of protest: risking life to defend life.

### **A clash in relations to aquatic ecosystems and the world...**

What is particularly striking when studying the situation and water management in the Adour-Garonne basin, is the gulf that separates the world as represented and experienced by the project’s opponents, and the world of the operators, of most of the politicians who represent them, but also of the section of the population that supports their politicians. It is as if two parallel stories were unfolding, which never meet. Particularly striking are the sharp divergences in representations of the ecosystem and in reasonings, whether technical, social, political, spatial or economic.

For the Tarn and Tarn-et-Garonne General Councils and the Compagnie d’Aménagement des Coteaux de Gascogne (CACG – the development company), rivers – and the Tescou is no exception – are defined by the level of the water flowing through them. In these terms, water levels are essentially classified as low or sufficient, which justifies the implementation of the PGE (Plan de Gestion d’Etiage – low water management plan), a scheme specific to the Adour and Garonne. Rivers with low water levels need action to correct the problem. What constitutes a “resource” is the water in the waterways (BLOT, 2005). In turn, their quality is also affected by the quantity of water flowing in them, since it is flow rate that dilutes pollutants. Waterway management primarily entails setting the target low water level, which in the case of the Adour-Garonne basin is the minimum flow required to achieve the right water volumes, i.e. the volumes of water sufficient to meet needs for 8 out of 10 years. The ecological compensation measures – improvement of other wetlands to counterbalance the land lost by waterway management, in

application of the polluter pays principle – are based on the principle of financial, ecological and spatial replacement value. The purpose of building the dam is to secure existing uses and the uses arising from the implementation of a water supply policy that generates increased demand. “Productive”, “profitable”, “efficient” practices, whether agricultural, industrial or domestic, are emphasised and “integrated management” enables them all to coexist. Meeting these objectives is thus a way to “*return to a balance between uses and environment*” by the “*creation of new resources to keep the natural environment running and meet demand for agricultural water and the management of those resources*” (PGE Tescou). In addition, the Tarn General Council has a policy for the protection of wetlands (it was even one of the first *départements* in the Midi-Pyrénées Region to set up a wetlands unit), but the policy for the management of these areas – in particular the so-called ENS (Sensitive Natural Areas) – is not “integrated” (*sic*) into water management.

Some local farmers and their families defend this dam project as they have defended others, on the grounds of agricultural development, the benefits of controlled irrigation and new production potential. Indeed, part of the population agrees with these arguments, as evidenced by the results of the election in Lisle-sur-Tarn of people clearly in favour of the dam, as well as the demonstration on 15 November 2014, attended by between 2000 and 4000 people. So the conflict between pros and antis cannot be summed up by a simplistic opposition between locals and non-locals, as Philippe Pelletier has already explained (PELLETIER, 2015). Local people can be found in both “camps” and, more complicated still, some people changed side after the intervention of the police.

In any case, the opponents completely disagree with the way the institutions see and present matters. For them, the proposed balance is an illusion. There is necessarily a dissymmetry. Dissymmetry in favour of certain uses/users and in favour of the operators, and against the aquatic ecosystems as water sources, both life environments and living environments. The ecological compensation measures are based on the displacement and fragmentation of an entity which, for opponents of the project, only makes sense as a single whole. In their view, the operators attribute no specific value to this wetland, only a value that is generic, dispersible, replaceable.

So the Testet collective claims: “*Wetlands are important reservoirs of biodiversity and play a strong purification role by filtering pollutants. They also contribute to the replenishment of the water table and are natural stores of carbon, thereby helping to limit the impact of human CO<sub>2</sub> emitting activities. Moreover, they reduce erosion, in particular coastal erosion, and provide protection from both flooding and drought by their capacity to accumulate water and restore it in dry periods*” (<http://www.collectif-testet.org/30+role-des-zones-humides.html>).

For the Testet collective, what constitutes a resource are the spatialised ecological properties of wetlands, or rather of the Testet wetland. For other opponents, in particular the occupants of the ZAD we met, the issue is more essentialist: the wetland needs to be saved because of what it is, and not because of what it does for human beings. Every component must be “preserved”, “respected”. Natural entities deserve the same respect as human beings. From this perspective, it is not a commodity, a fact conveyed by the erection of small tombs – crosses painted green – with the inscription: *here lived a tree*, or by the burning of wood from trees felled by the operating teams. “*We burn the wood so that the operators can't make money out of it*” (ZAD inhabitant, 7 September 2014). In fact, a significant proportion of the opponents in the ZAD advocate an alternative economic rationality, founded on giving and cooperation, one that rejects the idea of competition as a principle to follow. Economic reasoning is treated in the same way as other rational principles, whether ecological or social. For them, before trying to meet demand for water uses, all the different practices – domestic, industrial and above all

agricultural (irrigation for tree and corn growing) – need to be questioned, their relationship to the other and to “nature” rethought. In this respect, they reject growth as a central goal, as an end in itself, and the people we met in the ZAD believe that growth often serves the interests of the rich in collusion with politicians. Indeed, some authors (PAILLOUX, 2015; PELLETIER, 2015) argue that what is at stake in the opposition to “big, imposed, pointless projects” is an implicit conflict between rural and urban values in the management of rural space. For some of the opponents – in particular those living in the ZAD – the power relations that maintain a “capitalist system” run counter to the principles of autonomy, participation, equity, symmetry, balance between people, “anarchistic” principles that they support. For this reason, they have “no leader”, “no representative”, and are opposed to any political exploitation of the movement (hence the lukewarm welcome given to the leading lights of Europe Ecologie or the Front de Gauche). Some even see their belonging in the world on a planetary scale – *citizen of the Earth* – and stress the need to think not only about our impact here and now, but also there and tomorrow. Finally, they aspire to worldwide *social and environmental justice*. For these opponents, who come from different parts of France and are not part of the Testet collective, any place potentially becomes their territory if they see it as *threatened* by any “*capitalist undertaking*”. That is why they feel entitled to move into areas which, according to local inhabitants and politicians, are not theirs. In so doing, they challenge the idea of greater legitimacy being associated with *living or originating in* a place when it comes to planning and development decisions. This leads, for example, to another variation on the acronym ZAD, which for the farmers in favour of the project becomes: *Zone A Dégager* (clear-out zone).

*“I am a citizen of the Earth. I am here to defend the Earth and therefore these trees”* (ZAD inhabitant, 7 September 2014).

### ... combined with a confrontation in which life is at stake

Beyond attitudes to “water resources”, another issue, perhaps even more global and civilisational, emerges in the confrontations around the Sivens dam project: the question of *life*, its definition, its protection and its use. On the one hand, supporters of the dam seek to stress that the project is precisely intended to maintain and develop life in the Tescou Valley,<sup>2</sup> in particular because the extra water will provide sufficient low water flows to irrigate agricultural crops and maintain farms. As its name suggests, the aim of the “Vie Eau Tescou” Association (Life Water Tescou) is to ensure that there is sufficient water for people to live in Tescou.<sup>3</sup> The politicians backing the project use the same type of argument. On the other hand, opponents of the project have slogans like: “Their profits destroy life” or “The forest is life” (placards at the demonstration on 4/10 in Gaillac). They write graffiti like: “Sivens dam: massacre of nature.” Torn up trees are symbolised by crosses – like graves – bearing the inscription: “here lived a tree.” Well before Rémi Fraisse’s death, the demonstrations were accompanied by graffiti and slogans: “Carcenac assassin.”<sup>4</sup> Members of the General Council we spoke to could not understand the slogan, and seemed deeply upset by its use. It was only after somewhat uncomfortable discussion that they were able to see that the slogan should not be taken literally, but that it referred to the destruction of a wetland and the animal and plant species in it. Even after this had been explained, they still saw it as a “*serious thing to say*” (18/10/2014).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.paysantarnais.com/actualites/eau-l-association-vie-eau-tescou-a-convie-la-presse-a-une-rencontre-sur-le-projet-de-retenu-de-sivens:L77M3JH6.html>

<sup>3</sup> This association notably promotes the “protection of human and natural heritage, and particularly its vital element, the Tescou River” (<http://www.journal-officiel.gouv.fr/association/>)

<sup>4</sup> Thierry Carcenac is the Chairman of Tarn General Council.

For their part, the initiators of the ZAD claim that these wetlands are tangible proof that a "different world is possible" and that the forms of life they are defending there are unique. They write: "Anyone who has spent a day in these areas, remote from the greed of capitalist land development, can feel the vital force that springs from the experience of a life unfettered, returned to the wonderful freedom of fulfilling itself in its own way. A life that recovers confidence in itself, in the autonomy of its faculties and in its capacity to invent what it needs" (QUELQUE PART, p. 10 and 11).

Life is a polysemous notion, one used by some opponents of the project to make other – very broad – claims about resistance to the "*plans for life*" emanating from laboratories and biotechnology firms.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the construction of a dam and the flooding of a wetland, the opposition expressed here is to genetic modification, synthetic biology or human enhancement. From this perspective, life is in urgent need of protection in multiple ways: environmental damage, the ever-growing control over species and humanity, transformation into an autonomous commodity, a producer of "biovalue" (MITCHELL, WALDBY, 2010) in an advanced capitalist world. The calls put out by *Pièces et main d'œuvre*, a Grenoble group active in the opposition to biotechnologies, were picked up locally,<sup>6</sup> with particular emphasis on the status of "Chimpanzees of the future" in a humanity undergoing rapid biotechnological transformation.

For Michel Foucault, life historically became an issue in the struggle between governors and governed from the moment that States and Princes took it into their head to manage the populations in their territory (FOUCAULT, 1976). According to this view, this is how "biopolitics" emerged. No doubt, the philosopher would not have been able to foresee in his lifetime the future importance of developments in biotechnological modernity, and the conflicts around life associated with them. The dispute around the Sivens dam brings up issues that go far beyond the environmental problem of wetlands preservation alone: it prompts ideas and collective action relating to the very definition of life and its uses, today and tomorrow.<sup>7</sup> In a sense, it could be said that this opposition underpins claims that seek to deploy biopolitics as a response to the actions of the different authorities, whether state, corporate or both.

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<sup>5</sup> "While the emergence of "big pointless projects" attracts all our attention and draws on all our energy, nanotechnologies and synthetic biology are quietly developing below the threshold of public awareness... It is more than time to open our eyes to what is going on and to protest (against the bosses... of the multinationals, because there are no government leaders, they no longer exist, that is just a collective illusion) so that their plans for the destruction and control of life (ours too) are not realised" (Testimonial letter read at the day of contemplation held in tribute to Rémi Fraisse on Place du Vigan in Albi, 22/11/2014).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.collectif-testet.org/galerie-250-manifestation-a-gaillac-le-04-10-14.html>

<sup>7</sup> A very recent activist publication from the La Lenteur publishing house (*Sivens sans retenue, Feuilles d'automne 2014*) explores all these worlds of protest by reproducing various tracts, posters, letters and articles circulating amongst the different currents of opposition to the project.



*Photograph 1: Sign at the entrance to the ZAD, upstream from the site chosen for the construction of the dam wall (F. Blot, September 2014)*

What is clear is that we are dealing here with attitudes to aquatic ecosystems, and more broadly to life, which are hardly compatible, and even mutually exclusive. More than simple theoretical options, what is at stake here is also and above all perceptions of space. We can see that, in some cases, there is compatibility in perceptions on both sides of the project. However, many attitudes are incompatible. In the case of those challenging the dam project, this incompatibility is reflected in the recourse to conflict as a tool of social regulation. Conflict thus expresses the rejection of the dominance of one point of view and is reflected in the exercise of power to justify and assert one's attitude to things and to others... In this particular case, at the risk of life itself. Indeed, as Claude Raffestin has shown, any process of construction of relations to space entails power relations (RAFFESTIN, 1980). What we see here is indeed the appropriation of space by non-locals (occupants of the ZAD) and by locals (Testet Collective), united within the "*Tant qu'il y aura des bouilles*" (as long as there are faces) movement.<sup>8</sup> For these opposition groups, the perception of the characteristics and potential of the area, its future practices, is entirely different from that of the project's supporters. Although the opponents (Collectif Testet and occupants of the ZAD) do not share precisely the same views, they are able to come together around a common goal – defending the wetlands against the dam – and to coordinate

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<sup>8</sup> Formed in October 2013: "In the light of the havoc caused by the powers that be, the first of which is the colonisation of land by all sorts of artifices, the imprisonment of biological life in a multitude of constraints, the confiscation of responsibilities for the organisation of collective life, the « *Tant qu'il y aura des bouilles* » movement, established on 12 and 13 October 2013 at Métairie Neuve in the Testet wetlands, plans to take immediate action" - <https://tantquilyauradesbouilles.wordpress.com/page/40/>

defence measures in the course of long discussions and negotiations (highly codified general meetings). The dominant relationship to aquatic ecosystems reflected in local political decisions – approved by elected officials at general council meetings, the Adour-Garonne Water Agency, the courts, the State and also ONEMA (the French national agency for water and aquatic environments) – is defended both by the local and national police, and by the inhabitants who support them, sometimes through operations against the inhabitants of the ZAD.<sup>9</sup> In turn, the opponents – in response to this rejection of their views - challenge projects that are experienced as imposed. The initial lack of verbal argument between politicians and the project's opponents encouraged the recourse to different forms of action,<sup>10</sup> no longer founded essentially on discussion or debate, but on the physical occupancy of space, i.e. by the use of the body as an argument in power relations.

### Documentary and occupation activism

In Sivens, we find a mix of two forms of environmental activism that rarely go together. First, there is what could be described as "documentary activism", linked with the emergence of "expert activists", individuals who, over time, acquire a high degree of expertise around their specific case (OLLITRAULT, 2001). In this case, the expertise is embodied in the "Testet defence group", in the writing and analysis of articles, maps, archive folders, letters to the authorities, responses to public enquiries, petitions, all of which transform these activists into "paper-pushers for the cause" and from laypeople to experts. In some cases, this kind of activism may delay a project, but it rarely wins, since the administrative apparatus they face is more effective. The second form, embodied in the "*Tant qu'il y aura des bouilles*" group, operates through the occupation of the threatened terrain. This action is not just confined to blocking the rails in front of nuclear waste trains, occupying the Larzac plateaus, town squares, the perimeter of nuclear power stations, motorway tolls, cranes, etc., as environmentalists often do (OLLITRAULT, 2001), but entails living on site in a particular way. This may be termed "occupation activism". At Sivens, both forms are present, and manage to complement each other by overcoming their divergences: one, with a "legalistic" orientation, develops a "popular" expertise in Territorial Planning, reminiscent of "lay" mobilisation around "popular epidemiology" (BROWN, 1992); the other sets up a ZAD and revitalises the "repertoires of collective action" (TILLY, 2005) to place greater pressure on planning decisions than if they were content with a "traditional" demonstration.

So for example, in a small pamphlet published by opponents of the dam, we read that ZADs are one example amongst many of temporarily autonomous areas which "show the capacity of a social movement to thwart the plans of *mechanical democratic dictatorship* (italics in the text)" (QUELQUE PART, p.9, 2015). This is a reference to the new forms of occupation of public space driven by fairly radical opposition to financial capitalism (Occupy in Wall Street, the Indignants Movement in Spain, etc.). In the view of Cécile Van de Velde, for the young people involved in these forms of action, this action corresponds to an attempt to take charge of a destiny that is doubly beyond their control, both individually and collectively (VAN DE VELDE, 2011).

Occupying a site is a greater commitment than marching for a few hours to express opposition.

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<sup>9</sup> The Testet and « Tant qu'il y aura des bouilles » websites describe these sometimes violent confrontations, some of which we witnessed.

<sup>10</sup> The report commissioned by the Environment Ministry was evidence of the fact that the project had been mounted without really considering alternative arrangements: "The choice of a dam across the valley was made without any real analysis of possible alternative solutions" (Assessment of the Sivens dam project, Report 009953-01 - October 2014, Nicolas Forray and Pierre Rathouis).

It is also a demonstration that “another world is possible”; the efforts involved in such action can themselves bring something other than a consumer society: the building of makeshift shelters, meals prepared with organic or cheap products, shared washing up, collective trucks kitted out for sleeping as well as transport, everything funded by donations and charitable giving. The formation of a Zone A Défendre is both a method of action intended to influence the progress of a development project, and an enactment of attitudes to social life and to nature. This is doubtless its attraction for many young and not so young people who take part in this form of protest, which is clearly more immediately focused on action and practical change than is “documentary activism”. Some say that they are inspired, in day-to-day operation, by other ZAD they have lived on (in particular Notre-Dame-des-Landes).

The establishment of a “Zone To Defend” in the very location of an official “Future Development Zone” simultaneously represents a subversion of developer language, an alternative model of spatial planning and a new method of collective action. While “documentary activism” provides arguments and counter-assessments to justify opposition to the development project, “occupation activism” embodies what can or could be a space experienced and practised on different principles than those of the developers. The fact that general assemblies were held in Sivens in which both forms of activism were represented, very clearly shows the temporary nature of their complementarity, because of major disagreements about methods of action (the recourse to physical resistance). Obviously, whatever their preferred mode of action (documentation or occupation), opponents of the dam could also be involved in the other method: the documentary group were a regular presence on the site at weekends between spring and autumn 2014, while the occupation group quickly began to record their activities in legal “documents”, pamphlets, tracts and even self-published books.

### **Risking life to defend life: the ultimate choice of protest**

As well as complementing each other both theoretically and practically, by force of circumstances “documentary activism” and occupation activism” were prompted to support each other more forcefully still when faced with the reactions of the authorities and the hostility of certain local inhabitants, in particular farmers. The Testet collective’s call for an open public debate on the project got nowhere with the General Council, which cited the earlier public interest enquiry and its members’ near-unanimous vote in favour of the project. At this point, some members of the collective decided to begin a hunger strike when work began on the site on 1 September 2014. The response of the ZAD occupiers was to climb the trees and chain themselves there, to prevent them being felled by the contractors hired to clear the land prior to flooding. On both sides, risking life to defend the area and the life located in it (aquatic environment, threatened species, biodiversity), but also the alternative social and economic life they had created there, seemed the ultimate way to stop the dam project. In the end, the protesting body and its life (MEMMI, 1998) were used in the attempt to grasp the biopolitical initiative.

This resistance of the “weak” against the “strong” failed, since the work continued: the contractors felled the trees located around the ones occupied, which were brushed by the falling trunks. The police used teargas and then force to remove the people still resisting in the treetops. This was when the idea began to emerge of a possible tragedy in Sivens. Nonetheless, some activists decided to crank up their life-threatening action a further notch one morning, by burying themselves up to the neck on the access road used by the tree felling machines. The people involved in this action were not only the inhabitants of the ZAD, but also a number of locals outraged by the use of force by the project promoters. This attempt too was a failure,

since the police dealt unceremoniously with the “buried” by covering them with teargas and dragging them out of the ground.

It has often been claimed by the authorities that the opponents of the dam project, in particular the “Zadistes”, had used violence against the police. This may have been true on certain occasions, but what we mainly saw was the opponents countering police violence with their own bodies. In response to the intransigence of the authorities and the actions of the police, the activists decided to raise the “media profile” of their activities, and moved part of the ZAD to the forecourt of the Tarn General Council in Albi. The methodical destruction of the ZAD camps on the Sivens site, the burning of the campers’ personal affairs, the use of grenades (in particular “sting grenades”)<sup>11</sup> against the last inhabitants of the area, finally convinced the opponents to move to a different site. Some joined the Albi encampment, while others took up a position near the Sivens construction site on a plot lent by a farmer sympathetic to the protests.

It was then that an event occurred that was, to say the least, surprising in a state supposedly under the rule of law: counter-demonstrators whose identity remains uncertain began to form a sort of “militia” which set up roadblocks on the roads around the site and, according to certain witnesses, hunted down the people who had remained near the construction site.<sup>12</sup> Although we did not directly observe this phenomenon, we received accounts of it from various sources, though the local media were not very forthcoming about it.<sup>13</sup> Some people described how they had been threatened with hunting rifles, pursued into a wood and beaten with clubs. A strange rumour spread through the surrounding villages, reported by inhabitants who were not supporting the protesters’ action, that the police would not do enough to remove the “Zadistes” and that they would have to go themselves to get rid of the individuals in question. These people were “outsiders” who, it was said, had no business “here”. According to some, a strange atmosphere then pervaded the Tarn *département*, a sudden revival of the “old demons” of fascism and xenophobia. Once again, the feeling that it would ultimately lead to a drama around Sivens began to grow. This period was probably the hardest for the opponents of the dam project, especially as they were expelled by the police from the encampment they had set up on the forecourt of the General Council building. With no visible anchor point in public space, the cause seemed lost, especially as the tree fellers were completing their clearance of the site and preparing to begin stripping the ground, in order to eliminate the roots of the felled trees to prevent the vegetation regrowing.

However, at the end of September and beginning of October 2014, some of the opponents were organising for a big demonstration to be held on the site a month later. At this point, militant environmentalists of every stripe joined the movement, including the well-organised battalions from Toulouse (Europe Ecologie-Les Verts, Amis de la Terre, France Nature Environnement de Midi-Pyrénées). Tactically, the aim for certain activists was to achieve sufficient numbers to be able to reoccupy the construction zone and prevent the project being completed. The watchword was mass action to stop the project advancing. Not so much to do battle with the police, but to “give the resistance roots” and “put life back into the Testet”, in the words of the slogan that was beginning to circulate on social media and to appear on posters everywhere,<sup>14</sup> even well beyond the region, as far away as Paris. The poster shows a

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<sup>11</sup> Their use was noted in a report by the National Gendarmerie Inspectorate commissioned by the Interior Minister (see *Rapport d'enquête administrative relative à la conduite des opérations de maintien de l'ordre dans le cadre du projet de barrage de Sivens*).

<sup>12</sup> The *Reporterre* newspaper (<http://www.reporterre.net/spip.php?article6297>) describes a Facebook page which announced that the “hippy hunt” had started on the Sivens site.

<sup>13</sup> Though it is worth noting that at national level this event attracted the attention of a few journalists, including the *Canard enchaîné*, which published an article on the question.

<sup>14</sup> Against the Sivens dam: Roots for the resistance! Big demonstration, Saturday 25 October. Bring life back to

cabin built in a tree still standing in the midst of a treeless plain, a tactic for the physical occupation of space that had already been tried. At this point, for the opponents, the aim was to “hold on” until the end of October, while trying to delay the work as much as possible. Some tried to achieve something on the site itself, while others chained themselves to the railings of the tax office in Albi in order to condemn the “*misuse*” of public money in the dam project.

As 25 October 2014 approached, focusing the hopes and fears of the project’s opponents with regard to the reactions of the police and counter-demonstrators, some people tried to mediate between the “pros” and “antis”. For example, the “Local Citizen Action Committee” for Gaillac,<sup>15</sup> a town located a dozen kilometres from Sivens, organised a debate on the evening of 18 October, inviting both opponents of the project and the members of the General Council who had voted for it. The organisers began the evening by calling on the protagonists to “*find a solution, a way out of a situation where the Tarn community is deeply divided between people for and against the project*” and were happy to have “*finally managed to organise the public debate that had previously not happened*”. To convince the parties to talk, they noted that “*things could end badly*”. One participant added: “*somebody is going to die*.” A waste of time. The atmosphere in the room – and around the table between opponents and politicians – was tense. No one was prepared to shift. At one point in the session, a discussion began that might have led to the emergence of a negotiated solution: it was about the size of the lake project. One of the spokesmen for the “Testet collective” acknowledged the need for water to irrigate crops, but put forward the idea that the dam was too big and that a smaller project would have been sufficient. In return, the elected officials said that they had “*heard some interesting things said*” during the evening, and left with the promise that they would “*talk to their fellow politicians*”. The discussions continued to drag on, with 25 October one week off...

## 25 October

This was the background to the demonstration of 25 October 2014, when several thousand people arrived at the construction zone, to the delight of the activists in place, close to the end of their tether after almost two months of intense protest. Stands and marquees were erected for lectures and workshops. A jazz band played. The general atmosphere was good-humoured, with different generations and families present. One of us noted in their “field journal”: “At the entrance, boards bearing the three letters ZAD were attached to the trees; we met a lot of laid-back young people, “hippie” types with dreadlocks, baggy trousers, determined to defend a way of life different from their elders. However, there were also environmentalists in their fifties and sixties, people who had taken part in all the conflicts in the region, from Larzac to the Somport Tunnel, from the Charlas dam project to the A380 route development. Despite the lack of obvious labels or political affiliations, it was easy to recognise a good number of long-standing environmentalists in the region. A rostrum had been set up specially to give these older activists an opportunity to speak and explain why they felt the dam was an aberration. As with earlier causes, their speeches were a mix of environmentalism and anticapitalism. From environmentalist platforms to tents offering lessons in traditional food production, the atmosphere was essentially relaxed.”

However, there were certain suggestions that things were not in fact so calm, as the field notebook goes on to record: “the police presence was obvious, with the patrol helicopters flying back and forth over the site, attracting plenty of insulting or mocking hand gestures from

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Testet: buildings, workshops, plantings, debates, concerts...”

<sup>15</sup> A local activist group driven by the desire to promote the activities of the Front de Gauche in between elections.

the ground. In addition, there was a group of some twenty people, dressed in black, wearing masks, moving constantly and rapidly from one place to another, like a single unit."

When we left the site towards nightfall, we heard explosions from around 2 km away, which turned out to be the place where the dam wall was due to be built. The jazz band was interrupted by calls to the crowd to go and join the "front" and lend a hand to the "comrades being charged" by the police. Looking down on the valley from a distance, we could see a huge mound of earth, piled up by the bulldozers that had begun to strip the area and marked by dozens of crosses indicating that the area had become a burial ground of nature. In the background, black and ochre smoke rose into the setting sun. A strange lingering image of our last moments on the site that day. Little did we realise its significance at the time, the tragedy it heralded.

**To quote this paper: Marie-Pierre Bès, Frédérique Blot, Pascal Ducournau :** « Sivens : quand le dialogue devient impossible. Chronique d'un drame annoncé » ("Sivens: when dialogue breaks down. The making of a tragedy", translation: John Crisp), *justice spatiale - spatial justice*, n° 8, Jul. 2015, [www.jssj.org](http://www.jssj.org)

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