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A Return to the Grandmother of Modern Activism: The Myth of the Larzac Struggle as the Symbol of French Collective Action*

Abstract

From 1971 to 1981, a group of 103 farming families living on the French Larzac plateau united to protect their sheep farms and land from expropriation to create space for the planned extension of the nearby Larzac military camp. Five decades later, the name 'Larzac' still remains part of French collective memory as a symbol of local activism, directly contesting the legitimacy of nationwide centralised decision-making. This article analyses how the myth of the Larzac struggle as the grandmother of small-scale French collective action first emerged in French media coverage, as well as engagement by both the Larzac farmers and activists of the Occitan regionalist movement. It also shows how the continuous reappropriation of this myth has shaped other newer kinds of protest, as the memory of the Larzac is mobilised to speak to issues that are still relevant today, namely the protection of local regional identity and culture writ large.

Keywords: *Collective Memory, Myth-making, Larzac Struggle, Grassroots Activism, Social Movement Audiences, Social Imaginary*

From 1971 to 1981, a group of 103 farming families living on the French Larzac plateau united to protect their sheep farms and land from expropriation to create space for the planned extension of the nearby Larzac military camp. Over the course of these ten years, this local community managed to gain nationwide support for their cause, organising protest marches attended by hundreds of thousands of people from all over France. Five decades later, the name "Larzac" still remains part of the French collective memory as the symbol of local activism, directly contesting the legitimacy of national

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© Klartext Verlag, Essen, ISSN 2197-0394 (online)

centralised decision-making.[1] Or, as Gaël Franquemagne notes, there are several kinds of Larzacs, including the "real physical geographical space" and the "imagined symbolic" Larzac. This last Larzac lives on in the mythologization of the Larzac struggle as a series of "heroic moments" during which the local community reinforced its own authenticity and autonomy vis-à-vis the intrusive actions of the centralised French state.[2] More than a mere geographical location behind a social movement, the image of the Larzac plateau became a resource in and of itself. Over the last fifty years, hundreds of articles and news reports, as well as dozens of books and a handful of documentaries, have been dedicated to telling its story.[3]

The popular French news network *France Info* calls the Larzac struggle the "symbol of grassroots and anti-globalist movements."[4] Weekly newspaper *L'Express* goes even further, noting that "it was on this high plateau that fifty years ago a rallying cry resounded which became the symbol of all new forms of struggle: 'All together at Larzac' (*Tous au Larzac*)."[5] But why do certain movements create enough of a legacy, of a collective memory, for it to remain resonant long after they themselves have ended? In cases like that of the Larzac struggle, the creation of new meanings attached to old forms of protests ensures the longevity of such a legacy. These movements live on in our collective memory, gaining a near "mythical" status, mobilised not so much by their original generation of activists, but instead by outsiders, those who interpret and reappropriate them.[6] New generations of activists may try to forge a link between their

1 Collective memory is a complex term often reassessed and redefined within the social sciences. For the sake of this article, however, collective memory is defined as a shared framework of knowledge of a given group of people, which creates both "an awareness of its unity and peculiarity." Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 130. Or, to follow the definition presented by the French historian Pierre Nora, collective memory is a "set of memories, […] of an experience lived and/or mythologised by a living collectivity." Pierre Nora, "Mémoire Collective," in *La Nouvelle Histoire,* ed. Jacques Le Goff (Paris: Retz-CEPL, 1978), 398–402. This collective memory not only creates a sense of unity, but also helps form a collective understanding of the present based on a shared collection of representations of past experiences.

2 Gaël Franquemagne, "La Mobilisation Socioterritoriale du Larzac et la Fabrique de l'Authenticité," *Espaces et Sociétés* 143 (2010): 127.

3 Most recently, Philippe Artières has published an in-depth history of the Larzac region and its history of collective intervention, see Philippe Artières, *Le Peuple du Larzac: Une Histoire de Crânes, Sorcières, Croisés, Paysans, Prisonniers, Soldats, Ouvières, Militants, Touristes et Brébis* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021). In 2011, the documentary "Leadersheep" (original French title: "Tous au Larzac"), which centres on the stories of several Larzac farmers who took part in the protests, won the César French national film prize.

4 "Le Trésor des Templiers: Mythes et Légendes du Larzac," *France Info,* 3 September 2014.

5 Philippe Chevallier, "Tous au Larzac!," *L'Express,* 23 May 2021.

6 The term myth, for the sake of this article, does not relate to some kind of normative judgment, focusing solely on the realistic factualness of the representation of the past. Rather,

struggles and older victorious movements, borrowing aspects of previous activism that speak to them and their ideals. Journalists and scholars use specific social movement examples to draw comparisons and explain larger waves of contention. In each case, the specificities that shaped a movement may become lost within the new context and framework it is applied to. The most prevalent meanings attached to certain past movements, then, are no longer merely the product of the actions and definitions created by those directly involved, but rather of those who reinterpret and reify them with their own new goals in mind. The myths of movements like the Larzac struggle are in fact rarely controlled by those directly involved, but rather by external audiences that attach their own meaning to them.

This article will analyse the myth of the Larzac struggle as the symbol of small-scale French collective action. In order to do so, it will look at the ways in which three different kinds of external audiences, journalists, scholars and other social movement activists engaged with the legacy of the Larzac struggle. This kind of post-movement engagement is essential to the survival of certain struggles as part of the collective memory, even when first-hand knowledge dies out. This article is therefore meant as a step towards gaining a better understanding of the process of (re)appropriation and of myth-making that take place on the side of external movement audiences.[7] It aims to contribute to that process by following the creation of a collective memory of the Larzac struggle as the main symbol for French collective action since the 1970s, from its reappropriation by the regionalist Occitan movement that took place alongside it, as well as its continued application in two modern-day cases: the protests against the construction of an airport in Notre-Dame-des-Landes and those against the construction of the Sivens dam.[8] Looking at the engagement of activists of those movements

myths are narratives centred on the relevance of certain events that function as a compelling explanation or illustration that not only reshapes our understanding of the past, but that also carries “significant meaning for the contemporary perception of the world.” Anna Ceglarska, “The Role of Myth in Political Thought,” *Krakowskie Studia Z Historii Państwa I Prawa* 11, no. 3 (2018): 346. These myths are the subject of constant reinterpretation and reappropriation, as they have to adapt to the ever-changing social realities they are applied to.

7 The field of social movement studies has over the years created theoretical frameworks that study similar kinds of cross-movement borrowing and continuity. Think for example of Charles Tilly’s well-known work on the repertoires of contention, which centres on the general transformations and inheritance of established action repertoires. Similarly, framing theory scholars have concentrated on “master frames,” overlapping meanings and aims that allow for large varieties of action groups and supporters to unite and form relatively heterogeneous coalitions. Yet, the process of decentralisation and recontextualisation that allows for specific movements to essentially turn into abstract concepts of their own, sometimes without clear connections to their original actors and aims, remains an interesting field of study where more research is still needed.

8 Although prominent supporters of the Larzac struggle, the Occitanists were far from the only external action groups collaborating with the local farmers. Other involved groups

with the memory of the Larzac struggle, this article shows that the early process of increased applicability and accessibility through the adaption of this memory by the regionalist Occitan movement, paved the way for the creation of a mythicised imaginary that remains highly resonant even today. At the same time, it acknowledges that the Larzac farmers themselves had their own reasons to make the legacy of their struggle as diverse as possible, ensuring the support of a wide variety of external sources and ensuring its mythical status.

The Larzac Struggle and its Context

The Larzac struggle has often been framed as much more than resistance against the extension of the military camp, but as a fight for a certain kind of *paysan* lifestyle that was being threatened not just locally, but all throughout France.[9] The Larzac farmers represented the traditional French countryside, in which the community still triumphed over the individualism of the post-industrial age, and people still were intimately connected to the land.[10] Through the participation and support of nationwide activist networks, most notably the ecologist and regionalist Occitan movements, this is the image of the Larzac struggle that spread through France at the time, and remains prevalent today. Virginie Magnat, for example, suggests that the Larzac struggle as an iconic symbol of French social movements "anticipated similarly memorable political interventions by Greenpeace, Act Up, and the Occupy movement."[11]

included the French environmental and antinuclear movements, pacifist groups led by activists such as Lanza del Vasto, Maoists and radical left political groups. An article of this size, however, does not leave enough space to discuss all the different ways in which each of these groups engaged with the Larzac struggle, and helped shape its surrounding myth and continued resonance as part of the French collective memory. The case of the Occitan movement is therefore chosen as a useful example of the coalition-building within the Larzac struggle, its dependence on external engagement, and its reappropriation by other forms of activism.

9 The French 'paysan' as a term for someone who lives and works in the countryside is sometimes translated as peasant, yet the French connotation misses the derogatory value of its English equivalent. In this case, in particular, paysan is used to refer to the specific traditional culture and lifestyle of France's countryside. During the Larzac struggle, the term was often used specifically as a "demand, a banner," as the farmers saw "the value of the term paysan, one rooted in the pays, someone who defends a territory." Donald Reid, "Larzac in the Broad 1968 and After," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 32, no. 2 (2014): 104.

10 Sarah Farmer, *Rural Inventions: The French Countryside after 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

11 Virginie Magnat, "Occitan Music Revitalization as Radical Cultural Activism: From Postcolonial Regionalism to Altermondialisation," *Popular Music and Society* 40, no. 1 (2017): 64.

Going one step further, French media outlets frequently describe the Larzac struggle as the "grandmother," or the "mother of all battles of 'real people' against an ignorant, unjust and brutal state."[12] Following this narrative, the Larzac plateau becomes the birthplace of the "French anti-globalist movement."[13] Similarly, later social movements are given, or claim for themselves, the title of "descendants or heirs" of the Larzac struggle's legacy.[14] More than just a symbol to learn from, the Larzac struggle became known as the ancestor of a wide variety of modern-day collective action all over France. A grandmother whose legacy and DNA they not only inherited, but without whom, to continue the family tree analogy, this new generation of French activists could have never been born in the first place. In order to understand how a protest taking place in a small localised community became known as the grandmother of modern-day social movements, this first section will provide a closer look at both the origins of the Larzac struggle, and the context in which it took place.

On the 28 October 1971, the French Minister of Defence Michel Debré announced government plans to expand the existing military camp in the Larzac, situated in the department of Aveyron in the South of France. When the camp was first built in 1902, it took up about three thousand hectares, a mere three per cent of the Larzac plateau. Debré's vision, however, required an extension of nearly six times that size or about seventeen thousand hectares.[15] He argued that the plateau had been scarcely inhabited for decades, and that the expansion would only mean the expropriation of "a few, not many peasants raising sheep and still living in more or less medieval ways."[16] It was a process that, he promised, would bring benefits to both the national army and the economic stability of the region. Although Debré's speech in 1971 formed the official announcement of the government's plans and is therefore often considered as the start of the Larzac struggle, news of the possible expansion of the military camp first broke at a 1970 meeting of the *Union des Démocrates pour la République* (Union of Democrats for the Republic). The first large-scale demonstration

12 Clair Rivière, "Retour sur la Lutte du Larzac, Aïeule des 'Zones à Défendre' et Berceau de l'Altermondialisme," *Basta !*, 19 July 2021, https://basta.media/Le-Larzac-rejoint-bien-d-autres-luttes-interview-Le-Peuple-du-Larzac-Philippe-Artieres-CQFD; Jean-Denis Renard, "Le Larzac, Cinquante Ans après que reste-t-il de la Lutte ?," *Sud-Ouest*, 24 October 2021, www.sudouest.fr/environnement/le-larzac-cinquante-ans-apres-que-reste-t-il-de-la-lutte-6645584.php.

13 Stéphane Hurel, "Que reste-t-il de la Lutte du Larzac ?," *La Dépêche*, October 18, 2021, www.ladepeche.fr/2021/10/18/que-reste-t-il-de-la-lutte-du-larzac-9860180.php.

14 Gaël Franquemagne, "Les Mobilisations Socio-Territoriales: Le Larzac, une Cause en Mouvement" (PhD Diss., Université Montesquieu-Bordeaux IV, 2009), 126.

15 Reid, "Larzac," 99–122.

16 Mathieu Gervais, "Le Rural, Espace d'Émergence d'un Paradigme Militant Décolonial," *Mouvements* 84, no. 4 (2015): 79.

took place in Millau in May of 1971, although the size and frequency of the protests increased significantly after Debré's announcement.[17]

Over the next ten years, the group of 103 local farmers, together with activists from all over the country, organised protests against the extension. At rallies and marches in 1973, 1974 and 1977, massive crowds of over fifty thousand people gathered at the plateau to demonstrate.[18] Actions such as a protest in 1972, when the farmers brought sixty sheep to the Eiffel Tower with the words "*Sauvons le Larzac*" (Let us save the Larzac) and "*Des moutons, pas de canons*" (Sheep, not canons) written on their fleeces, ensured national media coverage in all the major newspapers.[19] During the autumn of 1978, the locals embarked on a march on foot from Rodez in the Aveyron to Paris, stopping at a different town every night to hold meetings and gain the support of the local population. A year later, a group of Larzac farmers pitched their tents on the Champ de Mars, a historic military field in Paris, demanding their farms should not be turned into another battleground.[20]

Many of these actions were based around the need to create a spectacle, to keep the Larzac struggle on the agenda and to sway public opinion throughout the country. Although originally depicted as a small and isolated community in Michel Debré's speech announcing the extension of the camp, actions like these showed that local farmers were slowly but surely winning nationwide support for their cause, while building increasingly stronger action networks to fall back on. From as early as 1971 onwards, the Larzac was already becoming a nationwide synonym for all kinds of local antimilitaristic action. *Le Monde* first described the expropriation of people for the benefit of the army in the Dordogne as a "new small-scale Larzac"[21] in 1972, followed a year later by the resistance against a "Larzac in the Lorraine region" when the French army planned to settle near Nancy in the North-East of the country.[22]

The Larzac struggle has often been portrayed as the symbol of confrontation between the authenticity of the French local community on the one hand, and artificial cold nature of the highly centralised modern state on the other. From the very start, the Larzac farmers actively reinforced this narrative. They presented themselves as a non-violent, hyper localised action group. But despite this curated image of a local

17 "Marché de Protestation Contre le Projet d'une Extension du Camp de Larzac," *Le Monde*, 11 May 1971.

18 Andrew Tompkins, "Transnationality as a Liability? The Anti-Nuclear Movement at Malville," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 89, no. 3 (2011): 1365–1379.

19 Franquemagne, "La Mobilisation Socioterritoriale du Larzac," 130.

20 Reid, "Larzac," 99–122.

21 "À Saint-Astier, la Gendarmerie Mobile Veut Occuper 115 Hectares: UN NOUVEAU LARZAC?," *Le Monde*, 6 June 1972.

22 "UN 'LARZAC LORRAIN': Élus et Agriculteurs s'Opposent à l'Installation de l'Armée près de Nancy," *Le Monde,* 31 August 1973.

community fighting against growing centralisation and modernisation, the farmers were also acutely aware of their need to gain the support from outsiders. Forming allegiances with pacifist, political leftist and even early environmentalist groups, the Larzac farmers consciously created a narrative that could easily be reappropriated by a wide variety of action groups, each with their own ideologies and potential audience. During a 1973 demonstration, for example, hundreds of striking workers of the LIP watch factory came to the Larzac plateau to declare a "marriage of LIP and Larzac," and the start of a joint uprising of peasant farmers and the working class.[23] Similarly, sheep and tractors were frequently used at demonstrations and protest marches to stress the farmers direct link to the traditional rural lifestyle they aimed to protect, but also formed an attractive link with the growing national interest in rural culture and lifestyles.

The reappropriation of the authenticity and purity of the countryside had led to the birth of regionalist movements all over France. The *Front Culturel Alsacien* (Alsatian Cultural Front) and the group *Bretagne et Autogestion* (Brittany and Self-government), for example, were founded in 1974 and 1973 respectively.[24] Working together with the regionalist Occitanists, and framing the Larzac struggle as part of the larger regionalist movement, thus opened up the possibility of gaining support from activist networks from all corners of the country. José Bové, who moved to the Larzac during the struggle, notes for example that "when I arrived at the Larzac, I immediately sensed a coherence between the place and my aspirations. […] I'm not a bird on a branch, I am in the real world."[25] Bové later went on to make a name for himself as a prominent figure within the environmentalist and anti-globalisation movements and as a member of the European Parliament, but he remained concerned with the future of the Larzac region. The Larzac struggle during the 1970s provided him with some of his first activist experiences, and he was also actively involved during later protests against the construction of a McDonalds in Millau and the organisation of a large-scale anti-globalist protest in 2003 at the Larzac plateau. While much of José Bové's political renown stems from these later protests, many descriptions of his political activism highlight the Larzac struggle in shaping his ideas on globalisation, environmentalism and the defence of rural lifestyles.[26]

23 Robert Gildea and Andrew Tompkins, "The Transnational in the Local: The Larzac Plateau as a Site of Transnational Activism since 1970," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 3 (2015): 590.

24 William R. Beer, "The Social Class of Ethnic Activists in Contemporary France," in *Ethnic Conflict in the Western World*, ed. Milton J. Esman (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 143–158.

25 Rixa Ann Spencer Freeze, "French Food vs. Fast Food: José Bové Takes on McDonald's" (Master's Thesis, Ohio University, 2002), p. 30.

26 Wayne Northcutt, "José Bové vs. McDonald's: The Making of a National Hero in the French

As for the case of the Larzac struggle, the local farmers initially had only one goal in mind, namely to prevent the extension of the military camp that threatened their livelihoods and local environment. Although they collaborated with external protest networks, such as Catholic youth groups and later on the regionalist Occitan movement, they strived to keep autonomy over their actions, to ensure that their own personal struggle remained at the centre of attention at all times.[27] Social movements, however, do not form and develop in a social vacuum, existing independently from the spirit of the time or social changes in society writ large. In an era that was marked by the rise of all kinds of new social movements, the Larzac struggle was hardly a stand-alone case.[28] Yet its quick spreading popularity and widespread media attention made it an easily accessible and thus attractive point of reference, or even resource, for all kinds of different movements to use. Jennifer Ann Peeples stresses the importance of "appropriation" amongst collective action groups. She studies the appropriation of the term "downwinders," an identity marker first exclusively used by those who lived "downwind" of the nuclear weapons production site in Hanford, Washington, to demand attention for the radioactive air pollution they were exposed to.[29] The term "downwinder," much like the name "Larzac," later transformed into a synonym for all kinds of related struggles, located all over the United States. This increase in the number of organisations and diverse local groups that use and appropriate the term for their own purposes, causes for "the concept of the downwinder [to] expanded to cover and conceptualise the various victim/place/toxin constructs to which it is articulated. The loss of a particular identity may be a gain for the concept's general applicability."[30]

Although losing some of the authenticity and specificity of the original use of a term like "downwinder" or "Larzac" as a result of this process of appropriation and increasing abstraction, it ensures that like-minded action groups can overcome the occasional limited amount of resources and symbolic value they need to spread their message across larger audiences. Or, as one former member of an activist committee

Anti-Globalization Movement," *Journal of the Western Society for French History* 31 (2003): 326–345.

27 Reid, "Larzac," 99–122.

28 In the analyses of many European social movement scholars, the 1960s have crystallised as the era of a new kind of social movements, centred on the creation of shared identities, cultural change and highly interpersonal networks. Social movements became the crossroads where the personal, such as sexual identity in the LGBTQ+ movements or the traditional patriarchal nature of the household in feminist movements, became a part of the political. The feeling of community and of shared values, became prominent markers of social movements from the 1960s onwards. Paul D'Anieri, Claire Ernst and Elizabeth Kier, "New Social Movements in Historical Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 22, no. 4 (1990): 445–458.

29 Jennifer Ann Peeples, "Downwind: Articulation and Appropriation of Social Movement Discourse," *Southern Communication Journal* 76, no. 3 (2011): 248–263.

30 Ibid., 259.

later admitted, "we made the farmers mythical for political reasons."[31] As Jasper *et al.* note, the narratives surrounding social movements often stress the importance of heroic individuals over the work done by supporting networks of activists, yet scholars "tend to forget that these narratives represent thoughtful character work by the movements themselves."[32] Bringing up the example of Martin Luther King as the face of the American Civil Rights movements, they note that "King was not an all-powerful organiser and decision maker. But as a symbol, King was a superhero."[33] Social movements depend on the creation of these heroic and highly sympathetic figures, often forming a strong contrast to some deceitful opposition, which are used to not only inspire but also mobilise others.

The representation of the Larzac farmers as an isolated, virtually politically powerless, yet incredibly determined and close-knit group, gave the movement an almost heroic image, the French *petit pays* (rural countryside) fighting against the all-encompassing centralised state, a modern version of David against Goliath. Despite active involvement of national action groups, who not only supported the Larzac farmers during the struggle but also helped create and maintain the struggle as part of the French collective memory, it is the image of a small group of local farmers against the omnipotent state that proved most resonant. José Bové later acknowledged the importance for the farmers themselves to create such a legacy for themselves. He argued that to "lead a struggle, you need roots," and that the Larzac had turned itself into "a culture and a history" even for people living far outside of the plateau's geographical borders.[34]

Real-time connections made between movements, for example between the Larzac and Occitan struggle, provide more than just the ability to piggyback on the potential success and resources. Rather, as will become apparent throughout this paper, they show the broad applicability of an individual case to a variety of causes, making struggles such as that of the Larzac interesting not only amongst audiences of activists, but also to society at large. As Chin-Chuan Lee *et al.* stress, "collective memory can be best understood as a sensitising umbrella concept referring to a wide variety of specific

31 Pierre-Marie Terral, "Gardarem lo Larzac : de la Dimension Occitane de la Lutte Paysanne à son Cheminement Mémoriel," *Lengas* 69 (2011): 104.

32 James M. Jasper, Michael Young and Elke Zuern, "Character Work in Social Movements," *Theory and Society* 47, no. 1 (2018): 114.

33 Ibid., 118. It is worth noting, of course, that a number of scholars have criticized the use of Martin Luther King as the symbol of the Civil Rights movement, and the way it takes attention and importance away from underlying grassroot networks. See for example, Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

34 Terral, "Gardarem lo Larzac," 103.

mnemonic products and practices."[35] Movement-led appropriation and myth-making is one of those practices. Yet engagement from outside of the movements themselves is also essential. Struggles get resolved or die out, activists grow older and move on, and first-hand knowledge of the specificities of individual cases slowly disappears. Outside actors, such as new generations of activists, but also journalists and scholars tend to turn to the past to "frame current issues but also to predict the future."[36]

Retellings of events that took place in the past demand a certain level of abstraction, not in terms of rendering social processes more accessible to those who were not a part of them, but also simply because the past can never be seen as separate from its relevance to the present. As David Meyer and Deana Rohlinger note, "the stories we tell about the past reflect contemporary values and beliefs."[37] The vast complexity of historical events will inevitably be in some way reduced, reshaped or simplified to form a coherent and continuous narrative. Such narratives offer us a "convenient shorthand," a way of understanding the past that helps us understand and analyse those aspects of social change and political protest that are deemed important through the lens of our own general understandings of social change, and our own theoretical or cultural biases.[38] The creation of myths and symbols of social processes plays an essential role in this, because they help accentuate those parts of social movement that have become most resonant, most easily accessible and seemingly most characteristic of a certain time. For later generations of activists, an extensive retelling of all aspects of a movement like the Larzac struggle is not only of little practical use, but also potentially less attractive to a version that stresses a particular characteristic that is of interest to them. Modelling themselves to a specific version of a previous movement that fits their own ideological framework, strategic goals or need for historical justification, they reappropriate or deliberately misremember the parts of history that fit their current needs.

Instead of being placed inside of larger frameworks of social change, specific events and social movements often get turned into the heart of their own development, the start of the context in which they develop. This leaves us with a narrative that centres on the "immaculate conception" of a social movement, in which key events occur and actors mobilise themselves seemingly spontaneously, without being rooted in larger

35 Chin-Chuan Lee, Hongtao Li, and Francis L.F. Lee, "Symbolic Use of Decisive Events: Tiananmen as a News Icon in the Editorials of the Elite U.S. Press," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 16, no. 3 (2011): 336.

36 Ibid., 337.

37 David S. Meyer and Deana A. Rohlinger, "Big Books and Social Movements: A Myth of Ideas and Social Change," *Social Problems* 59, no. 1 (2012): 137.

38 Ibid., 142.

processes of political, cultural and social development.[39] Or, to refer back to Gaël Franquemagne's work on the Larzac struggle, it leaves us with a new dimension that focuses less on the physical or geographic nature of a conflict, and instead becomes part of the imagined representation of what remains of importance, and thus should be remembered.[40]

On the side of scholarly literature, the term Larzac seems to have taken on an almost mythical meaning that reshapes the perception of the original struggle, but in turn also creates a new frame of reference for other protests to fit inside of. The Larzac as a geographical location has become synonymous with a much larger scale of activism, "generalisable and extendible beyond the plateau."[41] The Larzac struggle then, is pushed inside a framework that no longer limits itself to its originally intended and case-specific objectives, and instead paints it as the prime example of nonviolent resistance to the centralised power of the modern industrialised state that has the potential to shape other protests. Mathieu Gervais, for example, describes the 2014 protests against the construction of the Sivens Dam across the river Tescou as being embedded in the heritage of the Larzac struggle, presented as the symbol of activism against French militarism, technocratic power and centralised statism.[42] In trying to understand this kind of myth-making, or the creation of a narrative in which one event or one movement can become the symbol for a much larger wave of contention and change, and placing a lot of weight and significance on singular case studies, we often forget to ask why this process matters in the first place. As Anna Ceglarska notes, myths are in their essence a form of explanation that "have strived for a certain universality," making them both widely applicable and suited for constant reappropriation and reinterpretation.[43] References to the Larzac struggle as the grandmother of all kinds of local forms of collective resistance against the workings of the modern centralised political system, almost turn the history of the Larzac into a concept of its own, a useful tool to connect cases that are perceived to be similar in an easily understandable way.

The "social imaginary" of the Larzac as the marker for all different kinds of collective action has become one of the dominant features in the analysis of modern French social movements, be that those centred on the centralised state/local community binary, or more broadly to fit descriptions of large-scale often environmentalist

39 Verta Taylor, "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance," *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 5 (1989): 761.

40 Franquemagne, "La Mobilisation Socioterritoriale du Larzac," 127.

41 Gwyn Williams, *Struggles for an Alternative Globalization: An Ethnography of Counterpower in Southern France* (Farnham: Routledge, 2008), 29.

42 Gervais, "Le Rural," 73–81.

43 Ceglarska, "The Role of Myth," 347.

protests.[44] The use of the name Larzac, then no longer revolves around the aims and effects of the protests as desired and decided upon by the activists directly involved at the time. Rather, the real legacy of the Larzac struggle can be found in the way it still resonates as a part of our collective memory, and in turn shapes our understanding and analyses of movements and protests far outside of its original reach. Portrayed almost as the prime example of a struggle that never really ends, as it continues to inspire and influence collective action even today, this social imaginary of the Larzac remains resonant precisely because its continued use makes it a readily available and easy to understand way of explaining and contextualising contemporary cases. It is no surprise then, that even the physical location of the Larzac plateau remained a prominent place for all sorts of activism, from an anti-globalist demonstration attended by hundreds of thousands of people during the thirtieth anniversary of the original struggle to current anti-shale gas fracking protests. Even the original 1970s activists seem to grasp the unique longevity of the widespread attention for their cause, as a 1973 edition of the activist magazine *Larzac Informations* notes how "the Larzac is the privileged place of all kinds of struggles, our presence today is just a stage in this fight."[45] Longing both for the solidarity of people all over France, and the recognition of the exemplary status of their own struggle, the local action committee spoke of the existence of "Larzacs everywhere," emphasising that what was happening to the Larzac farmers could happen again, anywhere and at any time.[46] As the following section will show, the "Larzac struggle" has become a kind of umbrella term, designed to fit a wide variety of modern-day movement characteristics, be that the activism to protect rural communities, to support regional identities, or simply as a way of invoking the memory of a movement of unlikely activists that managed to secure a victory against the dominant French state.

44 Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar stresses the importance of "social imaginaries" as means of shaping collective life and collective memory. These social imaginaries are perspectives on reality, or frames of reference that turn into shared ideas and identities, as well as value systems and socio-cultural practices. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "Toward New Imaginaries: An Introduction," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 4.

45 "Intervention des Paysans Travailleurs," *Larzac Informations Août, Septembre et Octobre* (1973), *Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis, Berlin.*

46 Gildea and Tompkins, "The Transnational in the Local," 581–605.

The Creation and Deployment of Myths: the Occitan Movement

As mentioned before in this article, the Larzac farmers often staged protests they knew would get a lot of attention from the media, portraying their struggle as that of the French countryside and traditional local communities against the impersonal centralised state in a way that resonated with large parts of the population. Creating a strong social imaginary of sympathetic and ordinary citizens, concerned with the protection of their local identity and way of life, they made it easy for people all over the country to identify with their situation, to frame the movement as exceeding the geographical borders of the Larzac plateau. Perhaps more importantly, however, the Larzac struggle was one of the few movements of its kind and time that actually proved to be victorious, which naturally made it one of the more memorable and also more attractive examples of what a movement should look like.[47] As Robert Benford notes, "once a social movement fashions and espouses a highly resonant frame that is broad in interpretive scope, other social movements within a cycle of protest will modify that frame and apply it to their own cause."[48] Attaching yourself to a movement with a certain level of historical grandeur speaks directly to the memory of that movement, and makes clear what is at stake, even to those outside both the old and the new protests. It conveys the message that the same level of importance should be given to contemporary struggles as to the ones already taken up in the collective memory, as they present themselves as existing within the same realm and legacy of protest. The following section of this article will look at the creation and deployment of one of the most prominent characteristics of the modern-day imaginary of the Larzac struggle, namely its strong roots in Occitan regionalism.

One of the first external activist networks openly supporting the Larzac farmers was the regionalist Occitan movement.[49] This movement revolved around the promo-

47 In 1981, the newly elected socialist president François Mitterrand decided to officially abandon the plans for the expansion of the military camp, following the annulment of those by the French Court of Cassation a year earlier. Land that the state had already acquired in preparation of the project was turned over to the community, as the *Société Civile des Terres du Larzac* (Civil Society of the Larzac Soils) made up of and run by local farmers was given a lease of the lands.

48 Robert D. Benford, "Master Frame," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social and Political Movements*, ed. David A. Snow et al. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 1.

49 The Occitan movement of the 1970s was not a one singular movement, but rather a collection of several activist networks, united through their similarity in ideas, means of protest and slogans, of which '*volem viure al païs*' (we want to live in the country) is perhaps the most well-known example. As Frans J. Schrijver notes, "there has always been friction between a movement defending a homogenous Occitan culture, and Provençal, Auvergnat,

tion and protection of the Occitan culture, through the support of bilingual French and Occitan education at schools, or even the call for autonomy of the region. For the French historian Daniel Fabre, the Occitan culture is considered to be one of rurality and of peasants, existing in contrast with the urban industrialised culture of the rest of France that tries to dominate it.[50] One of the main ideological motivations behind the Occitan movement was that of "internal colonialism"[51] of the South of the country by the more industrialised and politically and economically powerful North.[52] Some even went as far as speaking of a cultural genocide of the rural communities.[53] From as early as May 1971 onwards, several hundred members of the *Comité Occitan d'Études et d'Action* (Occitan Committee for Study and Action), which had been founded in the early 1960s by linguist and historian Robert Lafont, pledged to help the Larzac farmers. The Larzac struggle proved to be an interesting opportunity to publicise the committee's two main spearheads: the reappreciation of the local identity of the region, and the demands for more autonomy regarding any changes to the living environment.[54] It fit into a larger framework of growing regional pride, identity politics and sociopolitical unrest in the Occitan region during the 1960s and 1970s, think for example of the mine workers strike in Decazeville or the winegrowers' movement. Although these movements each had their own objectives and strategies, those were based in overlapping regionalist ideologies, and activists within different movements often supported each other. As Yan Lespoux notes, the strikers, Larzac farmers, mem-

Gascon and other specificities within that large territory." Frans J. Schrijver, *Regionalism after Regionalisation: Spain, France and the United Kingdom* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2007), 203. For the scope of this article, however, these smaller activist groups will not be treated in-depth.

50 Daniel Fabre and Charles Camberoque, *La Fête en Languedoc: Regards sur le Carnaval Aujourd'hui* (Toulouse: Privat, 1977).

51 The term internal colonialism is not unique to the French Occitan movement, as it has been used to describe a great variety of forms of oppression, such as discrimination of black communities in the United States from as early as the 1960s. Robert Blauner, "Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt," *Social Problems* 16, no. 4 (1969): 393–408. As for the case of the Occitan movement, the concept of internal colonialism was mainly used by the linguist and historian Robert Lafont, one of the founding members of the Occitan Committee for Study and Action. In 1957, however, the French literary journal *Esprit* had already published an article titled Décoloniser la France (Decolonising France), which drew a parallel between the ruling of the French colonies and the ways in which the French government treated its rural regions. Alain Alcouffe, "Le Colonialisme Intérieur," *Conference in Tribute to Robert Lafont* (2009), 1–8.

52 Gildea and Tompkins, "The Transnational in the Local," 590.

53 Francisco Letamendia, *Game of Mirrors: Centre-Periphery National Conflicts* (London: Routledge, 2000).

54 Eleonore Kofman, "Regional Autonomy and the One and Indivisible French Republic," *Environment and Planning: Government and Policy* 3, no. 1 (1985): 11–25.

bers of the Occitan Committee for Study and Action, and even singers of the *Nòva Cançon* (a musical genre promoting Occitan culture and language) such as Martí all dreamed of getting out of their "regionalist ghetto," claiming that Occitania was neither "a colony nor a bargaining chip."[55]

The Larzac struggle formed a perfect real-life example of one of the regionalist movement's concepts of "internal colonialism." Describing the relation between Paris and the French countryside as one of exploitation and oppression, the regionalists created a convincing call to action for many local farmers. By casting themselves as the "victims of a centralising bureaucratic state," which provided no place for traditional small-scale family enterprises or local identities, they united themselves to fight one common enemy, the French state.[56] The Larzac struggle proved to be an excellent opportunity to connect the, up till then mostly abstract, idea of internal colonialism, to a concrete case.

Two of the most well-known slogans of the Larzac struggle, "volem viure e trabalhar al païs" (we want to live and work in the country) and "gardarèm lo Larzac" (we will keep the Larzac) are in Occitan, not standardised French. Yet the population of the Larzac had never been particularly involved in the Occitan movement before 1971. Or, as Didier Martin notes, "the Occitan identity of the farmers is an identity of collective opposition, it does not precede the conflict."[57] The slogan "gardarèm lo Larzac" itself was not even coined by one of the local farmers, but by Roland Pécout, a member of the Occitan movement.[58] It was used during several demonstrations, such as the tractor ride to Paris in 1973, as a way of openly linking the more cultural side of the Occitan movement, namely its demand for the official recognition of the Occitan language, and the political demands for more autonomy and the cancellation of the military camp extension. That is not to say, however, that this linkage is unanimously accepted among those studying the movement, or even deemed a proper representation of the situation. In an article for the self-described activist blog *Mescladis e còps de gula*, historian Jean-Pierre Cavaillé questions the legitimacy of "gardarèm lo Larzac" as a symbol of the Larzac struggle. He notes that, "'gardarèm lo Larzac' is obviously […] a picturesque patois expression, we must not reduce the history of Larzac, a history of a unique, serious and crucial social struggle to this."[59] In focusing on the accuracy of this generalising link between the regionalist and the Larzac farmers, however, Cavaillé ignores one major aspect of myth creation and the remembrance of events,

55 Yan Lespoux, "La Nòva Cançon Occitana e la Societat Mièjornala," *Lengas* 90 (2021).

56 Michael Bess, "Greening the Mainstream: Paradoxes of Antistatism and Anticonsumerism in the French Environmental Movement," *Environmental History* 5, no. 1 (2000): 9.

57 Didier Martin, *Le Larzac: Utopies et Réalités* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 1987), 134.

58 Terral, "Gardarem lo Larzac," 93–116.

59 Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, "Le Larzac sans l'Occitan," *Mescladis e còps de gula*, http://taban.canalblog.com/archives/2012/01/30/23373063.html.

namely that they are rarely controlled by those directly involved, but rather by the external audiences that attach their own meaning to it.

As movements grow and develop, but also certainly as the conflicts that cause them get resolved, their memory as portrayed by their audience, be that academics, new protest groups or journalists, becomes more and more relevant. The myth of the Larzac as part of the regionalist movement, in that sense, does not necessarily relate to the ways in which the actors directly involved in the struggle may have situated themselves, but rather to how it is interpreted and appropriated by those who aim to use it for their goals, as an example of how to organise a certain type of protest or as a symbol for a much larger process.[60] Although critiqued by scholars such as Didier Martin and Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, the use of the memory of the Larzac struggle as the symbol of the regionalist Occitan movement remains prominent. Sarah Trouslard, for example, cites the work of Valérie Mazerolle in noting that the Larzac is "at the heart of the preoccupations of the Occitan organisations."[61] Joan-Danièl Esteve speaks of the Larzac as the "catalyst" of the Occitan movement.[62] Similarly, Robert Lafont writes "we were born in Occitania, in the Larzac" in an article about the 2007 "Anem Òc, per la Lenga Occitana" protest for the defence of the Occitan language.[63]

While the struggle itself might not have started as a response to the regionalist ideals of more autonomy and the strengthening of the local identity, this Occitan dimension certainly helped the memory of the Larzac remain resonant, among scholars, but also in the French media. The French newspaper La Dépêche, for example, claims that France discovered the Occitan identity through the Larzac struggle,[64] and describes

60 It is, of course, often insufficient to imagine any social movement as an essentially two-sided affair, in which the social movement actors and their opponents, or the structure they reject or attempt to change, are the only parties involved. For James Clyde Sellman, the "crucial third dimension" is that of those who function as the movement's audience. Social movements are fundamentally triangular, because they depend on this third group, be that people not yet participating in any form of collective action or those adhering to a different action group, for potential support. James Clyde Sellman, "Social Movements and the Symbolism of Public Demonstrations: The 1874 Women's Crusade and German Resistance in Richmond, Indiana," *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (1999): 576. In the case of movements such as the Larzac struggle, that have become a near mythical point of reference for a much larger generation of movements, it is also interesting to consider the role of researchers as part of this third group, as part of the audience. Much like activists adhering to different action groups, scholars are engaging in several ways of analysing and utilising the collective memory and representations of a movement.

61 Sarah E. Trouslard, "Occitan Musicians, Immigration, and Postcolonial Regionalism in Southern France," PhD Dissertation, City University of New York (2020), 125.

62 Joan-Danièl Esteve, "Les Chanteurs de la Revendication Occitane," *Lengas* 67 (2010): 28.

63 Ibid., 52.

64 "Gardarem l'Occitan," *La Dépêche*, 24 October 2009, www.ladepeche.fr/article/2009/10/24/701145-gardarem-l-occitan.html.

the slogan “gardarèm lo Larzac” as an “obvious battle cry of the Occitan heart.”[65] Yet the strong symbolic power of the word “gardarèm” seems to have somewhat outgrown its specific Occitan roots. During recent years, protesters at Notre-Dame-des-Landes in the Loire region used their own Breton version of “gardarèm lo Larzac” (we will keep the Larzac), “miret ‘vo douaroù, Kernitron-al-Lann” (we will keep Notre-Dame-des Landes).[66] Both on the side of scholars and journalists, the memory of the Larzac is being invoked and mobilised not to merely refer to the resolved conflict the plans for the extension of the military camp caused, but rather to speak to issues that are still relevant in today’s society, those of the protection of local regional identity and culture writ large. The geographical and physical space of the Larzac plateau may no longer be the site of contention, the social imaginary that surrounds the legacy of the Larzac struggle as the triumphant symbol for local community and regional identity still remains.

Recent Uses of the Myth of the Larzac: Symbolic Power and Constraints

How can we still see the influence of the Larzac struggle’s mythical status on modern-day examples of social movements? Which aspects of the imaginary of the Larzac struggle, and its prominent place in the French collective memory, still help shape these new kinds of protests, by mobilising new activists or by creating a link between modern-day issues and the Larzac’s celebrated past? And how may such links, created by activists themselves or on the side of the press and scholars, also pose constraints to the ways in which these newer movements are understood? In social movements, collective memories can help create a sense of continuity and unity, allowing movement actors to integrate their action into a larger framework of collective action, or as a way of linking past and present struggle through the use of for example similar slogans and names. Memory work should therefore be understood as a continuous process of appropriation and reinterpretation.

Collective memory work is the activity of creating ties with the past that not only establish a sense of continuity within a larger history of collective action, but also a sense of unity and belonging among movement actors, who use shared understandings of the past and shared experiences to create their collective identity, values and beliefs, and movement objectives. As Frederick Harris argues, “it is not memories per

65 “Il y a 50 ans, Gardarem Lo Larzac (1/6): ‘J’étais bien Sage et puis l’Armée a Voulu Prendre Nos Terres…,’” *La Dépêche*, 3 August 2021, www.ladepeche.fr/2021/08/03/jetais-bien-sage-et-puis-larmee-a-voulu-prendre-nos-terres-9710863.php.

66 Artières, *Le Peuple du Larzac*, 5.

se that could directly influence collective action over time, but rather the meanings that aggrieved groups attach to those memories that could determine their capacity to assist potential challengers in their quest to make sense of new situations."[67] This ability to transform the memory of a past movement into a useful point of reference for a contemporary movement, does necessarily mean that the specificities of the former need to be simplified, in order for it to be applied to a new case. Past forms of collective action can continue to shape the strategic means and aims, or even cultural links in modern-day movements. Donatella Della Porta *et al.* argue, for example, that movement culture is a combination of "innovation and inheritance," and "broad sets of memories and representations."[68]

In 2012, the French government launched its "operation César," a series of expulsions of squatters objecting to the construction of a large airport near Nantes, the ZAD[69] (*zone à défendre*, zone to defend) of the aforementioned Notre-Dame-des-Landes.[70] Protests against the creation of the airport had been ongoing since its plans were first announced in the 1960s. In 2009, however, the conflict reached its peak when around 300 activists started illegally occupying the terrain.[71] Most of the land had previously been owned by local farmers who, similarly to the case of the Larzac struggle, had been evicted. Many of the squatters aimed to defend not only a return to a more rural way of life, but also the autonomy of the local community who "would not be subjected to the competitive and predatory logic of urbanisation."[72] Stressing the resemblances between the Larzac and the case of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, Patrick Warin urged President François Hollande in an open letter sent in 2012 to abandon the plans for the creation of the airport. He noted how his father, Jacques Warin, had worked together with Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy in 1981, at the end of the Lar-

67 Fredrick C. Harris, "It Takes a Tragedy to Arouse Them: Collective Memory and Collective Action during the Civil Rights Movement," *Social Movement Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 23.

68 Donatella Della Porta et al., *Legacies and Memories in Movements: Justice and Democracy in Southern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 81.

69 *Zone à défendre* (zone to defend) is a French neologistic term used to describe an area occupied by protesters, usually in order to stop development programmes. Notre-Dame-des-Landes has quickly grown to be one of the most well-known examples of a *zone à défendre* due to the "militancy, the persistence and the innovative potential of its inhabitants." Sonja Schüler, "The Zone à Défendre of Notre-Dame-des-Landes in France: An Ambivalent Space for Social Critique," *Urbanities* 1, no. 7 (2017): 45.

70 "'Notre-Dame-des-Landes: Chronologie d'un Projet très Contesté,'" *France Inter*, 17 January 2018.

71 Cécile Rialland-Juin, "Le Conflit de Notre-Dame-des-Landes: les Terres Agricoles, entre Réalités Agraires et Utopies Foncières," *Norois* 238–239 (2016): 133–145.

72 Anne-Laure Pailloux, "Zone d'Aménagement Différé contre 'Zone à Défendre': Analyse d'une Lutte pour l'Autonomie dans/de l'Espace Rural," *Justice Spatiale | Spatial Justice,* no. 7 janvier (2015): 1.

zac struggle. Warin warned Hollande that he was "faced with a new Larzac" and that "those of Notre-Dame-des-Landes and those of Larzac are the same kind of people, and millions of us will be supporting them so that they will be listened to."[73] The use of the Larzac struggle as a point of reference made sense not only because both struggles featured a local community taking on state-level decision-making, but also because the imaginary of the Larzac is often hailed as the triumph of such a local community in mobilising the rest of France. Warin aimed to show Hollande that he was taking on a battle much larger that it may have seemed at the surface level. A battle that, as he persuasively made clear by invoking the memory of the victorious Larzac farmers, the President was set to lose.

Patrick Warin was not the only person who tried to invoke the memory of the Larzac struggle as a tool in the case of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. On the side of the protesters, but perhaps more interestingly also on the side of state officials, references to the Larzac were a regular occurrence. Sébastien Lecornu, state secretary for Ecological Transition, that the government was "turning its back on any form of collective management. The Larzac model is promoted by the associations, and I have made very clear to them that the Larzac model was not the one the state would continue with."[74] Drawing a direct connection between the protests at Notre-Dame-des-Landes and the Larzac struggle, both Warin and Lecornu recognised that the latter's legacy still proved powerful enough to not only unite and inspire new activists, but also question the government's monopoly of decision-making processes. Although earlier depictions of "new Larzacs" during the 1970s had focused specifically on the antimilitaristic nature of the struggle, for example in *Le Monde's* description of protests against the construction of military camps near Nancy and in the Dordogne, this characteristic was not applicable to the case of Notre-Dame-des-Landes four decades later. Instead, the vitality of the struggle as a victorious symbol of citizen-led action, and of the tension between local communities and the national government became visible.

While the activists in Notre-Dame-des-Landes were protesting against the creation of an airport, over five hundred kilometres away over a thousand people gathered to oppose a different development plan: that of the Sivens dam over the river Tescou, in the region of Tarn. The construction of this dam would mean the destruction of 13 hectares of wetland, home to nearly a hundred protected species, including bats, snakes and salamanders.[75] As one local action group noted, "it is an unsuitable project

73 "NDDL par Patrick Warin," *Archives EELV*, 30 October 2012, https://archives.eelv.fr/mandatureRegions2010/elus-champagneardenne.eelv.fr/wp-content/blogs.dir/121/files/2012/12/NDDL_par_Patrick_Warin.pdf.

74 "Pas de Nouveau Larzac à Notre-Dame-des-Landes," *Reuters,* 20 March 2018.

75 Mathieu Brier and Frédéric Scheiber, "Avec Armes et Barrage: en Forêt de Sivens, l'Arsenal de l'Agro-Industrie Impose sa Loi et son Barrage," *Revue Itinérante d'Enquête et de Critique Sociale* 9 (2015): 140–143.

of which the environmental and financial costs are very high, and benefiting agricultural practices that are a dead end for farmers and for society as a whole."[76] During the early hours of Sunday 26 October 2014, a violent confrontation between the protesters and the police broke out, when a stun grenade fired by a police officer killed 21-year-old botanist Rémi Fraisse.[77] In the month that followed Fraisse's death, thousands of people took part in marches against police violence and against the construction of the Sivens dam all over France.[78] Although the official plans for the dam were abandoned in January of 2015, the departmental council of Tarn eventually voted in favour of the construction of a new dam, half the size of the original one.[79]

For Mathieu Gervais, the resistance against the construction of the Sivens dam follows in the footsteps of the Larzac struggle, as both highlight the "importance of the figure of the farmer as one of resistance against the state."[80] And parallels between the two cases are easy to draw. Once again, a crowd of people gathered to protest against development plans designed to destroy an area they praised for its natural beauty and authenticity. Even more importantly, José Bové, one of the main figures of the Larzac struggle, was a participant in several of the demonstrations against both the Sivens dam, and those against the airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes.[81] His first encounter with the people of Notre-Dame-des-Landes took place in 1973, at the height of the Larzac struggle, and Bové felt the two communities had a shared past. With regards to the modern-day activists, however, he was also quick to note the differences, stating that each action group needs to the discover "the rules of the game on their own"[82], and that Notre-Dame-des-Landes would be the "laboratory of the 21st century, […] which would have to be different than that of the Larzac."[83] The protests against the construction of the Sivens dam, he argued, formed modern-day opportunities for directly concerned communities to take control of the public debate. and to create flows of civil society expertise that work horizontally, instead of merely top-down.[84]

76 "Présentation," *Collectif pour la Sauvegarde de la Zone Humide du TESTET*, www.collectif-testet.org/23+presentation.html.

77 Victoria Xardel and Aurélien Berlan, "Les Lueurs Sombres de la ZAD de Sivens: Extraits de Sans Aucune Retenue," *Mouvements* 84, no. 4 (2015): 131–137.

78 Philippe Subra, "De Notre-Dame-des-Landes à Bure, la Folle Décennie des 'Zones à Défendre' (2008–2017)," *Hérodote* 165 (2017): 11–30.

79 Christophe Sibertin-Blanc, "A Formal Analysis of the Interplay of Actors Involved in the Sivens Dam Project," *Natures Sciences Sociétés* 26, no. 3 (2018): 291–307.

80 Mathieu Gervais, "Le Rural," 75.

81 "Du Larzac au Barrage de Sivens: 40 Ans de Luttes Écologiques," *Le Figaro*, 27 October 2015.

82 "José Bové: 'Notre-Dame-des-Landes sera un vrai Laboratoire Foncier du XXIe Siècle,'" *Libération*, 18 February 2018.

83 Ibid.

84 "Comment Sortir, au Mieux, de la Crise à Sivens?," *L'Humanité*, 10 November 2014.

The strategies and spirit of the time that aided the Larzac farmers during the 1970s could serve as a source of inspiration for new activists, but merely copying the past and applying it to today's society would not suffice. Although an actor in a seemingly continuous kind of protest that began at the Larzac plateau and is still continuing, José Bové made it very clear that the activists at Notre-Dame-des-Landes and Sivens would have to find their own way.

Mathieu Gervais's description of the Sivens dam protesters as direct heirs of the peasant-led Larzac struggle, contains another major flaw. The farmers who lived near the proposed site of the dam were in fact supporters of the plans, which would create better irrigation for their lands, and not part of the activist groups opposing them. In March of 2015, for example, a group of about 130 local farmers blocked the activists from accessing the site.[85] If any comparison should be drawn between the protesters of the Larzac and those of the Sivens dam, it should be that both fought for the protection of a rural environment, as can be found in the work of Philippe Pelletier, for example.[86] While the Larzac struggle was rooted in, and in fact characterised by, the importance of the autonomy of the local community as the leaders of the movement, the Sivens dam protests depended largely on the support of external activists. Where the 103 peasants of the Larzac shared a collective identity and worked together as one relatively homogenous unit, the situation at the Sivens dam is much more complicated.[87] As one inhabitant of the region noted, "the *zadistes* [the activists occupying the *zone à défendre*] need to get out of our way, and not come and piss us off at our home."[88]

Missing the support of a large part of the local population, and thus unable to create "a great mobilisation of everyone," many of the activists at the Sivens dam felt increasingly demotivated. Or, to use the words of one young woman interviewed by the newspaper *Libération*, "the Larzac was another time. [...] There is no more consciousness. People are lobotomised. They are not here, they are watching The Voice on

85 Brier and Scheiber, "Avec Armes et Barrage," 140–143.

86 Philippe Pelletier, "Sivens: the Removal of the French Territory by Means of Planning and Development," *Justice Spatiale | Spatial Justice* 7 (2015): 1–5.

87 The 103 local farmers of the Larzac struggle did also depend heavily on the creation of coalitions with a wide variety of external action groups ranging from the Occitan movement and antinuclear activism, to radical left and pacifist groups. It was the collaboration with the radical leftists and Maoists, however, that often caused tension during the early days of the struggle, as many of the farmers objected to the political and ideological views of these groups. Their involvement was occasionally seen as negatively impacting the farmers' autonomy to lead the struggle, and their frustration with this interference of external groups was at times similar to the annoyance of the locals at the Sivens dam with the zadistes.

88 "À Sivens, le Quotidien Toujours Explosif entre Pro et Anti-Barrage," *Libération*, 18 December 2014.

TV."[89] Although acknowledging the continued relevance of the Larzac as the imaged standard by which to judge or contextualise new movements, her words seem almost reminiscent of those of José Bové, urging the activists of Notre-Dame-des-Landes and Sivens to find their own ways of mobilising people. Where the breeding ground for the growth of nationwide support levels was still relatively fresh for the Larzac farmers, profiting from the wave of regionalist and anti-statists contention of the late 1960s and early 1970s, that specific part of the memory of the Larzac struggle is losing its resonant in today's society. As such, the use of the Larzac myth as a means of mobilising potential activists or of inscribing new protests as part of its legacy, has lost its practical use, and thus its attractiveness. Instead, the possibility of creating a link between the Sivens dam protests and the Larzac struggle, almost seems like a constraint rather than a resource. What we are left with, then, is a narrative that depicts the modern-day activists as grandchildren of the Larzac, rather masters of their own struggle.

While on the side of scholarly literature still a seemingly attractive symbol to describe modern-day protests, the memory of the Larzac seemed to be more of a hindrance than a resource to the activists at the Sivens dam. As mentioned before in this article, the overpowering legacy of some movements can also come with a series of constraints for newer generations of protesters. Missing a more direct link with the Larzac struggle, for example concerning the kinds of actors concerned or the role of regional identity, the memory of the Larzac no longer seems to mobilise the masses of people it used to. At the Sivens dam, the memory of the farmers exists in stark contrast with the opposition faced from precisely the local agricultural community. The Larzac is then considered to be merely a memory of the past, one that no longer translates to these new activist groups, who have their own battles to fight. While the Larzac still seemed a relevant point of reference for the case of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, as movement audiences are typically more receptive of a new movement narrative if it "echoes the basic outlines" of an already established one, this is not always true.[90] The case of the Sivens dam not only shows a shift between scholarly and activist understandings of the role of the legacy of the Larzac struggle as the prime example for virtually all locally-organised protests that followed it, but also between different sets of relatively similar movements.

89 "À Sivens, «Tout est Rasé, c'est Fini»," *Libération*, 25 September 2014.

90 David S. Meyer and Deana A. Rohlinger, "Big Books and Social Movements: A Myth of Ideas and Social Change," *Social Problems* 59, no. 1 (2012): 140.

The Myth of the Larzac Struggle as the Symbol of French Collective Action

This article set out to analyse the importance and the creation and reappropriation of collective memory, social imaginaries and myths in social movements. More precisely, it looked at the question of why and how certain movements create enough of a legacy, for it to remain resonant long after they themselves have ended. The collective memory of past struggles and forms of protest plays a vital role in the way that newer generations of activists position themselves, as part of larger narratives and action frames that offer both a source of inspiration as well as an opportunity to anchor themselves within larger pre-established waves of contention. The inheritance and reappropriation of specific memories, strategies, symbols and representations of reality forms a vital part of the work of many social movement activists. In order to study this process, the analysis of the case of the Larzac struggle, which took place between 1971–1981 but lives on in French society as the prominent grandmother of modern collective action, formed the foundation of this article.

As this article aimed to show, the creation and continued resonance of legendary myths of struggles such as that of the Larzac farmers as the grandmother of collective action depends both on the actions of involved activists themselves and their support networks, but also on the role played by external audiences long after the movement itself has died down. Outside engagement of the social movement audience, be that activists belonging to different movements, scholars or journalists, shaped the legacy of the Larzac struggle, and which parts of its story remain relevant as a means of understanding the present. Using the case of the Larzac, each with their own aims and attached meanings, they play a fundamental role in the creation of a social imaginaries of the struggle that moves past an understanding of the Larzac as a historical place of struggle, but rather as prime example of a kind of collective action in which modern activists are the direct heirs or grandchildren. One of the Larzac struggle's contemporaries, the Occitan regionalist movement, for example, did more than merely provide the Larzac farmers with a much larger audience and potential support network. As one of the first external movements to get involved and work together with the local community, the regionalist movement used the protests against the extension of the military camp as a way of linking their abstract ideological views on regional autonomy and identity, as well as internal colonialism, to a concrete real-life example. At the same time, their cooperation with the Occitan movement provided the Larzac farmers with the external support, resources and widespread attention they craved. The vision of the Larzac struggle as inherently Occitanist, although not without its critics, remains strong. Its representation as a symbol of the resistance of local communities against the centralising power of the French state continues to be attractive through its continued use in comparison to new cases, such as those of Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

One of the strengths of the Larzac case as a powerful symbol of collective action, is the fact that it was one of the few victorious struggles of its era, a fact celebrated and remembered not only on the plateau itself, but all over France. Even five decades later, the image of a small community persevering and ultimately winning against the dominant hegemonic power of the French state and political elite continues to inspire activists, and in turn be mobilised itself by people such as Patrick Warin. Warin linked the protests at Notre-Dame-des-Landes to those in the Larzac not merely because of its similarities in terms of movement organisation and aims, but also because the concept of the Larzac still manages to invoke the memory of this unlikely victory. This memory proved to be a powerful and persuasive tool that served not only to further motivate the activists themselves, but also as a warning to the state officials. What happened in the Larzac, he reasoned, could very well happen again, as the people of Notre-Dame-des-Landes fought the same continuous battle.

All of this is not to say, however, that the case of the Larzac can always easily be applied as the example or grandmother of all modern social movements that share some of its characteristics. Although highly attractive as a kind of cognitive map or even a shorthand to the analysis of these new movements, the case of the protests at the Sivens shows that the myth of the Larzac struggle is hardly a one-size-fits-all solution to understanding modern activism. To echo the words of José Bové, French society has seen some significant changes since the 1970s, and it is up to the modern activists to find their own strategies and ways of mobilising the masses in a way that appeals to the movement audiences of the twenty-first century. Although the resonance of the legacy of a case like the Larzac struggle remains strong, mostly on the side of the media and scholarly analyses, but also to a lesser extent amongst new generations of protesters, casting modern movement actors the direct inheritors, without paying attention to the specificities of each case, causes a kind of overgeneralisation that sells short the hard work of these new action groups in innovating and adapting old strategies, as well as coming up with their own. In this sense, the relevance of myths is something that not only changes based on the newer cases it is being applied to, but also part of a process that depends on the external audience that uses it, and its ability to achieve the goals of such an audience, be that to serve as a convenient shorthand to explain a long tradition of activism, or as a way of mobilising others as the inheritors of historic struggles.

As mentioned in the introduction, this article is not meant as a critique of the process of myth-making and the process of reappropriation in and of itself. On the side of activists, protest myths help provide ways of positioning themselves as part of larger narratives of collective action that speak to potential supporters, adversaries and the general public. On the side of journalists and scholars, myths such as that of the Larzac struggle provide a framework with which to structure the analyses of a wide variety of movements, as well as a way of gaining a kind of universality to be applied to similar cases and to connect them in ways that are easy to understand as they use

shared social imaginaries. So long as this imagery of the Larzac struggle prevails, there will still be new Larzacs presenting themselves, or being presented as, the grandchildren of that heroic first struggle. This article aimed to be a first step towards gaining a better understanding and consciousness of the ways in which myths allow for specific movements to become somewhat detached from their original actors and aims, but instead are created and shaped by those who appropriate them. In doing so, the field of social movement studies will gain a better insight into the ways in which the existence of such myth shapes our understanding not just of the movements that are being mythicised, but also the newer cases to which they are then applied.

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