

Standing at night, or taking it lying down?

It's been more than fifteen days since the start of the *nuits debout*¹ in the Place de la République in Paris. Hundreds of people have occupied the square for part of the night, after work, or college, or the dole or retirement. It's an initiative which followed the days of trade union mobilisation against the recent Labour Law and which saw the left and the extreme left marching together. From Julien Dray (friend and advisor to François Hollande) to Ségolène Royal (Minister for the Environment), from Anne Hidalgo (Mayor of Paris) to Jean-Luc Mélenchon (PG), from Olivier Besancenot (NPA) to Jean-Pierre Mercier (LO-CGT), from Pierre Laurent (PCF) to Julien Bayou (EELV), and as far as Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet (Les Républicains)², to name just the most well-known. All had great praise for the makeshift camp in the Paris square. Many old veterans of the extreme and autonomous scene of the French capital were gathered there too, who we won't name for lack of space.

Humans reduced to "citizens" of the Republic

It's open season on newcomers for the usual political rackets in the square. But the curious are very numerous. The "activists" can be counted in hundreds rather than thousands. The "leadership" of operations was quickly taken up by the veterans of the PG, the PCF and the NPA, and completed by the cadres of associations like *Droits devant*³ and *les Engraineurs*⁴. The programme is well described on the site of the nightards: "*Neither heard nor represented, people from all outlooks take possession of reflection about the future of our world. Politics is not a matter for professionals but a matter for everyone. The human being must be at the heart of the concerns of our leaders. Particular interests have taken over from the general*

interest".⁵ The excluded will launch a reflection on the future of the world in a Paris square. Nothing less. For that, they will re-appropriate politics so that "our leaders" finally put the human at the heart of their concerns. And the human, for the night owls, is nothing other than the general interest as opposed to the particular interest.

On this basis, capital, the state and its representatives can sleep soundly at night. After slaving away during the day, at work or not, the insomniacs of the Republic can let their hair down a bit. At the frenetic pace of two minutes each, the orators file onto the platform to set out their complaints and grievances. The well coded body language of the seated audience measures the popularity of the 120 seconds of intervention. The commissions, loads of them, are tasked with developing concepts barely sketched out in the citizens' assembly so that in the end – and why not? – a new Constitution can be churned out. The Sixth French Republic, dear to Mélenchon, Montebourg and the Lambertist Trotskyists is not far off. The indignant economist, director of research at CNRS, Frédéric Lordon can't be left out. With his reactionary precepts on "the necessity of national belonging", the defence of the state and leaving the Euro, he establishes the link between the French nationalist left, the sovereigntists and the night-owls.

Sleeping on it?

The attempt to liken the *Nuit debout* to the Puerta del Sol in Madrid or to Syntagma Square in Athens, so as to give it a noble parentage, is a fraud, and one doomed to failure. The numbers certainly make a difference, but it's not just that. There are social reasons too. Puerta del Sol and Syntagma were, at a certain point, places of coagulation of the anger of an educated and unemployed youth at the most acute moment of the fiscal crisis of their respective states. In both these places, at their height tens of thousands of radicalised young people came

¹ Literally: "nights standing up".

² PG = Left Party; NPA = New Anticapitalist Party; LO = Workers' Struggle (similar to SWP in the UK, but different Trot family); PCF = French Communist Party; EELV = Green Party; "Les Républicains" are a centre-right party (who used to be the UMP).

³ Organise actions in support of undocumented migrants.

⁴ A militant ecologist group.

⁵ <http://www.nuitdebout.fr/>

together to prepare demonstrations which were mass actions against the established order.

In the Place de la République, we've seen two successful actions: one an appeal by DAL⁶ to prevent an eviction, one an appeal from a collective of undocumented migrants to help some of them out. In the two cases the associations came to recruit volunteers. And then there was one move, without any real conviction, of a few hundred people who wanted to march to the Paris home of the Prime Minister.... The rest is a pathetic spectacle confined to the space conceded by the state. A spectacle essentially made up of drinking and bad improvised music; between a bad techno festival and a boy-scout camp.

To find any coherent thinking about the *Nuit debout*, there's hardly any point in looking in the Lidl of ideas in the Place de la République. It's the newspapers of the left of the state and the state radio, France Inter, which are in charge of inventing a coherence of ideas. Member of Attac⁷, former leader of the LCR⁸ and one of the founders of the SUD-PTT⁹ union, Christophe Aguiton, now transformed into a university professor, is among the most dedicated to creating an ideological *raison d'être* for the night-owls of the Republic..

The magic nights of the improbable Professor Aguiton

In his interview in *Libération* on 8 April, in a magical planetary pirouette linking the English-speaking Occupies to Puerta del Sol and Taksim Square in Istanbul, the Trotskyist even likened *Nuit Debout* to the Arab Springs. And he only saw a difference in time and place: here it happens at night and the occupation is intermittent. Elsewhere, it went on all day and the occupations were permanent. In fact, Puerta del Sol, Syntagma, Taksim, Occupy Oakland and, far more, the so-called Arab Springs, were characterised by offensive mass mobilisations with a more or less marked insurrectional character. In the case of the nocturnal Republicans, on the other hand, the rule is respect for order and the law. The overlap between Paris and these other places is rather the inability of

⁶ "Droit au Logement" ["Right to Housing"] who campaign around homelessness and evictions.

⁷ <https://www.attac.org/en/overview>

⁸ Revolutionary Communist League, Trot party founded in 1973.

⁹ Rank-and-file-ist ("Solidaric, Unitary and Democratic") post and telecoms workers union.

the movements to take root in the productive territories of the capitalist metropolises. In all cases the occupied places remained abstract places, *agoras* deprived of any durable, and, even less, solid links with social production.

Productive territories and abstract places

This failing has led more or less long term to the death of the movement or absorption into the cogs of the state: in Spain with Podemos, in Greece with Syriza. The novelty of the phenomenon is, in fact, its structural weakness in the face of the state and capital. The latter just have to manage the show confrontations when they happen. Of course, we have to make a different judgement about the Arab Spring, whose roots were more complex and far removed from those of Occupy. But, to Christophe Aguiton, it's enough that it happened in a square with a demo to establish a feature of equality... and modernity.

Yes, our sociologist of struggles sees in street demonstrations a new phenomenon which has imposed itself somewhat everywhere since the 1990s. Demonstrations, a new phenomenon... Really? To prove what he says he insists that the retraction of the reform of the special pensions regimes of Juppé (1995) then of the CPE of Villepin (2006), was the consequence of hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets. Habituated to journalistic simplification, he forgets the strong mobilisation of the rail workers and the staff of RATP, in the stations and workshops, and the mass strikes in the secondary schools and colleges at the time of the CPE.

In both cases, demonstrations acted as a complement to, and a crowning of, mobilisations which took over and blocked certain productive territories. It goes without saying that today there's nothing like that. The full-moon standard-bearer even goes so far as to belittle the strikes and factory occupations of 1936 and 1968, by only counting the numbers on demonstrations as the criteria of victory.

Is the strike, outdated and impossible?

The traditional form of class struggle, the strike is no longer attractive in his eyes. Worse, it has become "more difficult for many employees, because of more dispersed workplaces, casualisation, different working hours, working from home". The sociologist without a memory forgets that the SME has always made up the majority of capitalist firms and that insecure

contracts and the growing division of labour are constants in the condition of workers under the Capitalist Mode of Production. But the main reason that the strike is out-of-date is for him “the risk of being sacked, particularly in this period of high unemployment”.

Well, of course, it was a risk that our ancestors didn't face because unemployment didn't exist in the past, and the bosses gave flowers and pay rises to workers when they went on strike!

Just when we thought the ideology of the “indefinite general strike” was gone for good...

Booted out of the door, it wafts back in through the dream window of the chiefs of the night. Fifteen days after the start of the *nuits debout*, they perceived the practical uselessness of their initiative. And, so, they dig out the old myth so dear to French leftists, the “*indefinite general strike*”. A strike for salvation which will resolve all the contradictions and all the problems and unite all the workers. A strike which will bloom suddenly without any preparation, without previous struggles, without organisation. A type of strike which has never existed and which never will exist in the form envisaged by the ideological all-nighters. The mobilisation of the whole of the proletariat is the consequence of the rise in strength of struggles and mass agitations everywhere that the proletariat lives and works. These fights against capital and its appendages constituted by the unions and the leftie bourgeois parties can only develop themselves in stages, unifying as they reinforce each other. The general strike described here presupposes in the end a rootedness in productive territories of autonomous organisations of the class.

But it is not this idea of the general strike that our ideologues cherish. Their “indefinite general strike” will be the preventive burial of autonomous struggle. It will be called by the state unions and will politically serve the left organisations of capital. It will be in the image of the days of “struggle” against the Labour Law: ineffective, demoralising and useless¹⁰.

The night time dream, the only alternative from Professor Aguiton

While waiting for the “indefinite general strike” to come, only the dream of the night has the right qualities for the Trotskyist disguised as a researcher. “*It is not a question of blocking work, but of continuing*”. Continuing what? ...the demonstration and permanent occupation, miserable substitutes for the permanent revolution of their mentors. We mustn't block the economy (because how could we do that without the good old-fashioned obsolete strike of yesteryear?), we should feel alive in the demonstration and the (authorised) occupation of squares. A sort of inoffensive social protagonism, skilfully managed by the bourgeois media and by the state itself

In this strategy the media plays the greatest role, in fact. It is they who select the spokesmen, the designated representatives who largely represent them. They are the ones who give the positive and negative spin to the initiatives of the nightards. And it is finally through their intermediaries that contact with the state is established by means of reciprocal interviews and other “free” tribunes.

The sleepless nights of Professor Lordon

The social protagonism of the *Nuits debout* also fits in with the ramblings about the “political body” and “common affect” by the modern disciples of Baruch Spinoza, Messrs Frédéric Lordon and Antonio Negri. For Frédéric Lordon, emotion will be the *causa efficiens* of all mobilisation. Forget class hatred, forget material determination and, above all, forget classes. In this vision of those who “demand nothing”¹¹, what counts is the individual who distinguishes her/himself within small gatherings “*in movement*” of people sharing “*a common affect*”. “*Understand that after several decades of doing it, with you and people like you, demonstrating your talents and your depth of vision, the idea of negotiating in whatever way with you appears to us as absolutely pointless*” (idem).

To not negotiate is good! On the condition of knowing how to *take* what you need. On the condition of establishing an effective counter-power over and in the productive territories. A power seized through combat, by the determination of the greatest number of proletarians. On the condition also of having built the capillary political

¹⁰ For a critical analysis of the Labour Law, see:

http://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Leaflets/TR160409_Loi%20travail%20vFFR.pdf

¹¹ cf. <https://blog.mondediplo.net/2016-03-29-Nous-ne-revendiquons-rien>

organisation of workers' autonomy, against parties, unions, and other intermediary, administrative and executive bodies of the state. Unfortunately, where this is not the case, the class struggle takes a defensive form, and therefore includes demands and negotiation.

Journey to the end of the standing night

What the political result of these superficial agitations of civil society will be is still not clear. However, the fact is that the present executive, or at least a part of it, favours transforming this effort into a remake of SOS Racisme. This was an organisation born in October 1984, out of the rubble of the struggle of the Beurs at the end of 1983 (i.e. the "March for equality and against racism"). One year later, a little circle of four Trots from the LCR who'd completely gone over to President François Mitterrand, created, with the massive support of singers, actors, writers and leftie thinkers, a new youth organisation linked to the governing Socialist Party.

Involved in this manoeuvre at the time was also a certain Julien Dray and... François Hollande. In 1983 and 1984, the present President of the Republic was the cabinet director of two successive spokesmen of the third government of Pierre Mauroy (Max Gallo and Roland Dumas) after having been in the Élysée as a project manager.

For their part, the Mélenchons, the Laurents and the Besancenots try to revive interest in their pallid presidential candidatures for 2017 (the spokesman for the NPA supporting his invisible comrade, Philippe Poutou). "*I don't want to take over the movement and I would be very proud for the movement to take over me*", said the social-nationalist Mélenchon, without any shame, while always searching for new disciples during the TV show "Le Grand Jury", RTL-Le Figaro-LCI, at the beginning of April. As for the associated leaders of the sleep-walking republicans, they dream of Podemos to replace the previous lot in the top positions of leftie bourgeois politics.

The republican nights turn into a nightmare

The hundreds of thousands of more or less active participants in the night-time theatre of the Republic are therefore instruments of this "renewal" of leftie bourgeois politics wished for even by the President of the French Republic himself in his last televised intervention. "*I find it legitimate that young people, given the way the world is today,*

even given the way that politics is, want to express themselves, want to speak out", he said. It doesn't matter much if the participants in the Republican nights are conscious of this political operation. And, if some of them think that by "radicalising" a movement which doesn't exist they can damage this project, they are deluded. They also make up part of the spectacle, of the simulation of class struggle that the *Nuits debout* represent.

Philippe Martinez, boss of the CGT, reminded them in an interview in *Humanité Dimanche*¹² that "*we must not forget that the first Nuit debout was created at the end of the big demonstration organised by the unions. It is therefore a movement partly coming out of the social movement*". And when the boss of the CGT says "*social movement*", he means the recent inoffensive protests against the Labour Law organised by part of the state unions which he belongs to.

Philippe Martinez is right: the *Nuit debout* is also his creature. Without the support of his union, its SUD competitors, the PCF, the PG, the NPA, the EELV and the associations which gather around them, the nights of the Place de la République would not have existed.

These nights are the best demonstration of the impotence of the so-called "social movement" mentioned by the boss of the CGT in the face of the offensives of the bosses and the government. The strikes called by the unions failed, the demonstrations dwindled before our eyes. The *Nuit debout* remains the only alternative for pursuing symbolic "protest", the only way to continue the existence of the left of the state which has chosen an anti-establishment posture.

Night and day, fight for workers autonomy, against the state and capital

Faced with the political and social misery represented by the *Nuit debout*, and the political manoeuvres within the left of capital that it's led to, the only alternative remains the obscure, continuing, unassuming and most capillary work possible to root in the productive territories of capital the red line of workers autonomy, the political independence of the proletariat from all its enemies, nightards included.

¹² PCF newspaper.