

The Birth of 'Nuit Debout': a French Spring Awakening

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One night, after a demonstration against the ill-fated 'El Khomri bill', named after the French Minister of Labour and intended to reform the French labour market, groups of people decided to stay together on the highly symbolic Place de la République in Paris, in order to think, talk, debate and propose alternatives to current French politics. The 'Nuit Debout' (Up All Night) movement was born. This originally spontaneous initiative has progressively become organised in terms of logistics, but also with regard to its objectives, which have evolved more clearly.

Parallels with 'Occupy Wall Street' and Movimiento '15-M'

'Nuit Debout' shows many similarities with the Spanish 'Indignados' movement also known as Movimiento '15-M' and with 'Occupy Wall Street' in the USA. Firstly, because of its spontaneous character and its loose organisational structure. Secondly, because its mobilisation is not attributable to conventional actors (trade unions, NGOs, political parties etc.) neither does it depend on traditional ways of mobilisation. Individuals decided at one point to be part of a unique collective action. In the beginning, the idea was not to go straight back home after the demonstration, but to 'stay up all night'. Step by step, this idea has developed into a movement, with a defined organisational structure and clear objectives.

'Nuit Debout' is horizontally structured. Until now there is no national or local leader. The movement wants to enable everyone to participate in the experience. It tries out forms of participative democracy, a practice in which every voice has to be heard and taken into account. The decision making process takes place according to strict rules. Non violent and non obtrusive rules have been established enabling people to react to what is said without being interrupted. Every day at 6:30 p.m., the general assembly debates and votes on the proposals prepared by thematic commissions. These commissions are run by volunteers who want to further develop a specific issue and make policy proposals on it. There are two types of commissions: a logistic one (on communication, food, recycling and security) and a substantial one (on gender inequalities, the constitution etc). The second type targets to change the political system by proposing solutions, whereas the first type of commission aims to enhance the structure of the movement.

The similarity with 'Occupy' and '15-M' lies also in what these movements are or were about. The criticism expressed is similar. 'Nuit Debout', as its Spanish and American predecessors, rejects the current political and economic system. The criticism goes beyond traditional topics such as capitalism or the current crisis; it is the essence of our democracy itself in a global perspective which is questioned. People are fed up. They have the nagging feeling that political representatives rather than serving the common good follow their own agenda; the Panama Papers being one example among many that confirm their feeling. Still, the approach is constructive: 'Nuit Debout' pleads for an alternative, for a more representative state that achieves greater social justice for all of society. It aims at seeking concrete solutions for concrete questions.

The beginning of something new

'Nuit Debout's' call for a new world order has been branded 'utopian' by pessimists. Many do not yet take the movement very seriously. In Spain, the '15-M' managed to upset the political sphere: a giant network of people developing their own alternatives was born and made the Spanish two-party system crack. A defiant newcomer stepped into the political arena: Podemos. In France, even if the 'Nuit Debout' movement should remain isolated, restricted to the larger cities or turn out to be of a temporary nature only, it will still be more than just an anecdote.

Tocqueville's assessment that democracy, even though it is the best political system, is also unstable and dangerous for the people, is true. Devolving power through representative democracy strengthens the gap between the public and the private sphere. However, individualism has increased through various factors: the end of industrialisation, mass consumption, the rationalisation of the world. This has a positive impact in various fields such as creativity, innovation or human rights. But on the other hand people nowadays are more concerned about their private interests (family, career etc.) and have lost interest in what happens at a regional or national level or beyond, as if the ruling economic doctrine of 'laissez-faire' has also crept into everyone's view on politics. The thing is that citizens play a crucial role in the control of representatives in a democratic system, which also means that if they lose interest, the system is weakened. 'Nuit Debout' proves that citizens still (or again) do care about the public sphere.

It is not my intention to make a value judgment on 'Nuit Debout'. But what I do believe concerning 'Nuit Debout' is that it shows people still care about humanity and about politics. And even though the movement does not count millions of participants, the number of sympathisers is growing every day. The number of local branches is expanding, and international support (Madrid, Brussels) is taking off. People in France are aware of the fact that an open platform in which everybody is welcome and in which they can express themselves and propose ideas and actions does exist. After the Paris attacks and the proclamation of the state of emergency free speech has been re-installed.

I believe that for this reason alone 'Nuit Debout' has a great impact. Even if the movement disappeared tomorrow, it has already made a point: people have proved ready to invent a new world in a 'do-it-yourself' way. 'Nuit Debout' stands for citizen's empowerment: people do no longer hesitate to say STOP or NO. They do want to be part of the decision-making process and they can be united despite their differences.

Some questions remain. The first is whether this movement can be claimed by an existing party, such as the Melanchon's 'Front de Gauche'. From its beginnings up till now, any form of political hijacking from the traditional trade unions or from political parties has been firmly rejected. The second is whether the movement has the capacity to really include everyone, which is seriously doubted. Can a general movement that fights on different fields and issues be inclusive enough to avoid becoming the mouthpiece of an intellectual class composed by academics and highly qualified people? I have assisted several general assemblies and I have witnessed that until now the movement unites people from different social backgrounds, and this is its strength. As far as possible, 'Nuit Debout' tries to gain a foothold in the periphery because, if it remained almost exclusively focussed on the centre, this would be fatal not only for the survival of the movement but also for its ideals. The last uncertainty lies in its impact: can 'Nuit Debout' make the current political system change towards a more participative and equal system with more and better check and balance mechanisms? Only a fortune teller might know the answer to all of these questions, but one thing is sure: it is up to all those who are part of the movement to bring about a peaceful change. Whatever happens, change is underway and 'Nuit Debout' will have a role in it.