

The French Republic and the Paris Spring

Gregory Smithsimon

Has the French Spring arrived yet? Gregory Smithsimon documents La Nuit Debout, a self-named social movement that has taken root in one of Paris's main squares, where demonstrators have gathered since March 31 to protest the rollback of labor rights, repressive national security and refugee policies, political corruption, and indifference to ecological crisis. The main challenge for such movements, he argues, is to bridge the divide between the newly disenfranchised and those who were never enfranchised, between whites and people of color, between Paris and its suburbs, and between metropolitan France and its overseas territories.



Nuit Debout activists in Place de la République, Paris © Gregory Smithsimon

“The French Spring has arrived,” said Hanane, a 32-year-old Parisian, in the first week, hoping the protests are the start of revolutionary change like the Arab Spring.

The protest, called “La Nuit Debout” (“Up All Night”), began March 31 during a citywide protest against the proposed new labor law. A few hundred protesters occupied the square, and the event, (for which the group DAL, or Right to Housing, obtained a permit), has continued nightly ever

since. According to Bruno, a member of the media committee, the movement originated among people who were looking for a way to act politically after seeing the movie *Merçi Patron*,¹ a Michael Moore-style documentary about the depredations of a powerful CEO.

“It’s like Podemos,” said Benoît, a 23-year old from a *banlieue* in the *département* (county) of Essonne, south of Paris, referring to the mobilization in Spain that occupied Madrid’s Puerta del Sol for most of 2015. Many said the Occupy Wall Street style of protest—no leaders, the General Assembly, open mic, the twinkle fingers raised in the air to agree with a speaker at meetings—came from the Spain protests. Activists say La Nuit Debout sprang up in 25 French cities in March and April, and small protests have been continuous in cities like Caen and Rennes. In the last days of August, a hundred Nuit Debout activists from 10 cities met in Brittany; activists in Paris’s Place de la République have planned events for September.



A banner on the statue in the center of Place de la République: “Democracy, where are you?”

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In Paris, République is the go-to plaza for giving voice to popular movements. A makeshift memorial to the November 13 attacks is still tended around the central statue. (Le Bataclan is just down the street.) Only weeks earlier, a large protest departed from the square in opposition to the state of emergency that has been extended indefinitely since the attacks. But nothing has united the diffuse discontent of the French like La Nuit Debout.

¹ See an extract here: <http://en.labournet.tv/video/6995/thank-you-boss-merci-patron>.

A convergence of issues

“It’s disgusting,” said Marc, who calls himself “privileged” compared to other young people because he has a stable job as a baker. About rolling back labor rights, he said, “a left government has never done that before in history. They’re worse than the right-wing government before them.”

“It’s the convergence of all these issues,” said Marianna, a filmmaker. “Convergence” was on everyone’s lips: people spoke against the labor law, against the borders that refugees were dying to get across, against ecological disaster unabated despite Paris’s successful COP 21 meetings, against the state of emergency imposed after the November 13 attacks.

The Panama Papers’ revelation² that rich and powerful people had stashed millions in offshore tax havens (or “fiscal paradises” in French) only proved to those in attendance that the political class was corrupt. A sign reading “#Panama Leaks: enough corruption, people!” made a man named J.-B. a minor celebrity as people came up to have their picture taken with it throughout the night. “They’ve put billions there over the years,” J.-B. said, “but then they tell people it’s not possible to pay for pensions, education, refugees: tighten your belts, we can’t raise salaries. People are fed up.”



J.-B.’s sign at La Nuit Debout © Gregory Smithsimon

A new constitution for the Republic and a social Europe

This spring protesters have used the nightly General Assembly meeting to figure out what they want in place of the status quo maintained by current political elites. What should come from the movement?

² See: www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/world/panama-papers-explainer.html.

“A new constitution,” said a history student from the university in the suburb of Saint-Denis. Indeed, a group in the middle of the square was working on a new constitution. After President François Hollande proposed a constitutional amendment that would have stripped French citizenship from dual citizens suspected of committing or supporting terrorism, protesters suggested it was time that a constitution be redrafted by the people. France has had two constitutions in the last 75 years.

Many speakers felt that too much in France is determined by connections and birth. From political positions to celebrity stardom, too many key positions are handed down to “the son of the son of the son of,” said Bernez, who works in the film industry. What school one goes to can determine—or foreclose—one’s future. Politicians, even those disgraced by scandal, rotate through party positions.

People are unhappy with Europe. “The media says that to criticize Europe is to be *anti-Europe*,” Bernez said. He disagreed: “You can criticize the Commission or the European Parliament.” Protesters pointed out that this was different from a right-wing, nationalist opposition to Europe. “People are for Europe but not this Europe here,” explained J.-B., “We want a *social* Europe.”

Recent events crystallized skepticism that the new Europe was organized to benefit business, not people. The labor law was an effort to make France conform to directives from the European Union. The euro is criticized for making life more expensive for the poor, and for imposing austerity programs on countries like Greece and Spain.

A downwardly mobile part of the white middle class

Like Occupy Wall Street in its debut, La Nuit Debout initially attracted very few activists of color, a problem if these protests are to break the political malaise on the left. Organizations of Arab, Caribbean, and African activists share the dissatisfaction expressed by La Nuit Debout, but in the first two months their voices—and their critique of contemporary French neo-colonialism and racism—were rarely heard on the square. “Arabs and immigrants are not in evidence,” noted Hanane, looking around. Houria Bouteldja, spokesperson for the Parti des Indigènes de la République (which takes their name from the *indigènes*, those who were colonized by the French), said in response to an inquiry that the group was not involved in the protest because it focuses on issues of racism and intolerance, and that the occupation, in contrast, was “linked to the defense of the interests of a downwardly mobile part of the white middle-class.” Race and ethnic difference remain subjects that even the left in France often deals with ineptly; the challenge of inclusion is one that La Nuit Debout did not initially meet.



Nuit Debout activists in Place de la République © Gregory Smithsimon

On stage at the General Assembly, an African man spoke about the plight of immigrants from Africa, particularly *sans-papiers*, or undocumented immigrants. While a spokesperson for the movement stressed that La Nuit Debout worked “with” refugees, not “for” them “because they’re perfectly capable of engaging in the struggle themselves,” a look at a committee meeting on economic justice showed it to be about 95% white. Protesters worried about the difficult situation of immigrants and people of color in France today. Bernez singled out the position of Prime Minister Manuel Valls towards Rom immigrants as “worse than what [right-wing President] Sarkozy did.” He worried that young men in his neighborhood were excluded from jobs as soon as employers saw an Arab name on the application. But, reflecting worries about immigrant culture that traverse the political spectrum, he also worried that young people were hurting their chances for a job interview by interjecting Arabic words into their speech.

Opening up: from Paris to the suburbs and beyond

A month and a half into the protests, larger numbers of individual organizations began setting up tables and tents at La Nuit Debout, particularly during the weekends. Thanks to this opening, more groups representing people of color, immigrants, low-income suburban communities, and anti-colonialist constituencies began appearing regularly at République. Their presence broadened the issues addressed at La Nuit Debout, and brought together, in one public space, people protesting the immediate changes to the labor law and organizations whose immediate concerns included racism, French foreign policy, and housing. Several groups supporting Palestine participated in more significant numbers; a table sold the white-and-black Palestinian keffiyeh headscarf and literature. Members of the labor union Solidaires (often also identified as SUD) who had worked with groups on immigration, anti-racism, and postcolonialism were present. A group from the suburbs called Banlieue Populaire joined the Nuit Debout commission on housing; a member judged that

participants in the Housing Commission were half Parisian, half suburban. (Contrary to the US stereotype of suburbs, in France the suburbs—*la banlieue*³—frequently house poor or working-class immigrants and people of color.)



Placards suspended in Place de la République © Gregory Smithsimon

These groups said their experience in La Nuit Debout was positive. CRAN (the Representative Council of Black Associations) spun a farcical “wheel of fortune” representing the wealth to be plundered from colonies and former colonies. Members said visitors coming to their table were interested and supportive. The group *Françafrique* offered books and fliers examining the continuing inequality of France’s relationship to former African colonies. Mariama of *Françafrique* said the group had been well received.

In interviews, members of several groups downplayed what their participation might mean for the racial and ethnic politics of La Nuit Debout; they were affiliated groups like all the others. Although efforts to develop La Nuit Debout satellite protests in *banlieues* outside Paris were smaller than organizers had hoped, the presence of these groups by mid-May, in République and beyond, suggested that La Nuit Debout held at least the potential to write a new chapter in left politics in France. These new issues were accepted by the protesters at République, though they did not become central to the movement. Activists of color had managed to expand the discussion beyond the concerns of the disillusioned white working class, but not to the point that La Nuit Debout became a central event for activists of color.

³ When talking about “the suburbs” in general (and particularly the poor suburbs), the word is used in the singular with a definite article (*la banlieue*); when referring to a specific suburb, an indefinite article is used, i.e. *une banlieue*; and when referring to a group of suburbs, the plural form *les banlieues* may be encountered (e.g. *les banlieues chics de Lyon* – the chic suburbs of Lyon).

The challenge of inclusive social movements in Europe

With Britain's vote against the European Union in June interpreted as a xenophobic response to immigration, the direction populist protests take in Europe will depend on whether immigrants are cast as problems or allies in addressing the European crisis.

As larger numbers of poor and working-class people in France have immigrant roots outside Europe and face discrimination based on race, religion, ethnicity, and immigration status, La Nuit Debout represents the challenges facing French social movements generally. Many activists in France are skeptical of identity politics, dismissing "community" as a synonym for an isolated enclave; they resist multicultural political organizing in favor of a unitary "republican" ideal. Activists of color embrace the republican ideal as well, downplaying racial and ethnic identity much more than American activists. But identity matters, as demonstrated by the differences between critiques of French society originating from social movements with origins in the former colonies and critiques that come from movements rooted in France. La Nuit Debout's key challenge is to articulate a disenfranchised class's sense of political betrayal while also including the voices of groups who were never fully enfranchised in the first place. For the thousands on the plaza, the truth is that "community"—including the community of protesters—can be both exclusive and inclusive. Protesters made clear that they desire an inclusive Europe, humane treatment of Syrian refugees, and a meaningful response to the discrimination that locks young people—Arabs and immigrants most of all—out of jobs. The issues that triggered the massive protest—threats to previously secure employment, betrayal by an elite professional class, a once reliably certain future rendered precarious—are those of a class that once believed they were at the heart of the nation. For La Nuit Debout, demanding a more inclusive Europe has required developing a more inclusive movement.

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