NUIT DEBOUT DE LA REPUBLIQUE

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Abstract:This short text is a personal impression of an event that took place in Paris, France. In 2016, a self-organized movement called Nuit debout *served as a ground for people to seek a practical resolution to a social problem, and, more importantly, to express their freedom. In the process, a sign language was developed to accommodate the need for the communication of a large number of people.*

Keywords:Paris, Nuit debout*, personal impression, freedom, communication, protest, Jacques Derrida.*

Writing is hard. Every story has been already written, told, twisted like an elastic rubber band, and smuggled from one place to another. We, for better or worse, must tell our stories to the others regardless.

In Paris, one cannot stop wondering—while being lost in between the lines of the street maze that unfolds over the wrinkled river like two pages of a living manuscript—about the stories and the incessant tale of fates this city wrote in the past.Wondering about myself, the destiny, and the dreams of this giant mystery ball that will never leave one's heart. Wondering if the whole world could be Paris. It is impossible to start any decent story that happened in this city without beginning the story on the city's streets. All of them, if one will take the time to trace, will end up somewhere, somehow, on some crowded alley for some unknown reason. I will try to describe what I saw and what I have heard.

It was, in a way, pleasurable to stand outside and listen to my classmates speaking in flying French. Without understanding much, I could sense the course of the conversation, picking words, only to repeat them in my mind without knowing the meaning. Humorously, although in my mind a phrase might have sounded French enough, it could never take even a remote shape of anything close to the original when spoken out loud. I have entertained myself with the thought that maybe one day, I would drop, with ease and a nonchalant attitude, the French attitude, a word or two in an ordinary conversation among friends. Or better yet, I would surprise them with a quote from my Jacques Derrida uttered in French. This particular dream, however pseudo-intellectual it may sound, is still with me.

Often, before the class started, students would gather in a small courtyard of the Sorbonne's University at the *Département du Monde Anglophone*. Not to chat, but to prepare themselves, have a sip of coffee, and to smoke a cigarette. A loose crowd in waiting would

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slowly bounce between pale pillars having short bursts of conversation peppered with silence and rising puffs of smoke. The current fashion was to roll your own cigarettes. Holding a white filter in the corner of the mouth, students would carefully turn a thin, transparent piece of paper filled with a small mountain of orange tobacco. Others, having more money, smoked white, stocky factory-made cigarettes. One girl, in particular, wore bright red lipstick, loose black jacket, and a white shirt. Her way of smoking was natural and ultra cinematographic, making me concrete frozen. Frozen like a bottle of Martini left in a freezer until steered and drinkable again. The small talks would go on about writing a memoir, last night parties, home going for the weekend, and other comfortable topics. The words would echo around the inner court making its way out to the *l'École de Madeline* street. So, this is how it was, we stood, we smoked, we laugh and talk before our class. After the course, we would flock away as fast as we could. No particular friends were made, no one looked for anything personal. There was an air of relaxed attitude, somewhat free and independent. I liked it this way.

In April, without any preparations and with a lot of pretext, the event took place on the streets of Paris. The red dot of the civil protest was placed on the map, it was the *Place de la République*that became its epicenter. Whether it was a "good thing" or not I will let others decide. Nevertheless, it had an effect on me. The event we are referring to was called *Nuit debout.* And, this particular incident that happened in the heart of Paris elevated the question, a personal question; —"What do I do, do I protest?!"

I have never participated in a protest before. In fact, my whole childhood was covered with a tone of obedience to anything that was larger than me. My parents, my teachers, the school director, the lifeless outskirts of micro-district with cold, dull bloc buildings. Even the city trams had a message written in red paint "Do not stick your head out!" Everything had to be toned down, quiet down, and uniformly dead. The fear breaded a type of the abnormal normality in which one cannot register other possibilities and thus falls under a steamroll of reality that creates an accepted uniformity. The 'anti-idea' to have an alternative idea, an option as such, erases itself under the weight of the fear, letting the accepted and uninformed ideas to act like the (DOS) Disk Operating Systems, guaranteeing a stable functioning of the mechanism. Uniformity cannot express itself. Moreover, uniformity does not seek an expression, for any expression is lethal to the uniformity. Any expression by default is an expression against.

The place where I lived at that time was on the other side of Paris, in the center, slightly away from the crowded streets. My daily goings were through the *Place de la*

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République square. Whether I would go to school, or to spend time sitting by the Seine river, I would inevitably come through the *Place de la République*. I followed the same route until one evening I started to notice people standing on the square late night, doing something. Most of the time people would organize in small circles and sit under the makeshift tents, discussing things, arguing, expressing thoughts, laughing. Later, people brought whiteboards to the square, covering them with markings and neatly written texts. Discussions were open to anyone who had something to say, yet there was a kept order and respect for the others. I saw young people being passionate and focused on ideas. Theytried to figure out things, to come up with a solution to something, to a problem.

There were two sides to the event. On the one hand, there was a shared expression of the protest. It had something of a gesture, a unique, collective movement of limbs and thoughts, as if there was "a thing" outside of each participant that made this gesture possible, a sum of things, intentions, dictated by something within each person, yet living outside, larger than an individual. On the other hand, there was a disorganized looseness to the whole thing. An air of humanity, a human way to be individually different by being individually flawed. It was not an organized military platoon ready to act in any given moment, to take things in their hands, to skillfully kill an opponent and win the battle. On the contrary, the lack of structure made *Nuit debout* feel alive, approachable, human.

One weekend, a girl brought a pick-nick blanket and a basket of fruits. She set on the asphalt in her modest dress cutting bananas into smaller pieces so the people could eat. Later, the police shotpepper sprayfifty meters away from her, she didn't flinch, she did not move. Just a girl. I thought of the atomic bomb going off in my head. Something changed, I have changed, right then and right there. After that scene, I decided that in spite of everything, I had to bring my body to the square, to contribute the only means of support that I had. To donate my body to whatever people wanted to solve at that square, at that time. Every day for the next month I would do that, bring my body to the square, sit and listen to the people, see their eyes, and hear their words. You see, the question I had to ask myself earlier was somewhat superficial. And the answer is not an answer at all, it is more like a natural gesture, spontaneous yet thoughtful. The entire event was more of the collective expression, a performative fundamental of the freedom. We are not only biomatic, rational beings, we are also beings that require, need, and demand freedom. We are also the beings that must push the horizon of our freedom and must do so regardless of the conditions. In our freedom we find our sovereignty, with independence we are in charge of your destiny.

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Words were important to me. People and words are important, their actions, how they sound, what they do, and how they feel about doing it. French words were all around me, I swam in them. I stood and listened, again, frozen and mesmerized by the beauty of the language. The French language is beautiful, you cannot argue with that. If you do argue with that, you are a fool, and you need to live a little! Even if spoken by the second-rate Hollywood actress as the mockery, in a crappy film, it is still great. It elevates you over life because it is larger than life!

I have collected French words on the Place de la République square like an insane lepidopterist.

> *Vie, d'accord, confiance, sauterelle, divinité, taches de rousseur, menthe poivrée, échange. Liberté, démocratie, peuple. Heureux, choisissez, centre-ville, cadre, lumineux, au revoir, armure. Chaud, fourmilier, pailleté, pièces, démon, industriel, déconnecter. Sauce, conflit, banc, blaireau, différent, nomade, angoisse, serpent. Diva, picturale, direct, croire, chose, saule, agrandir, console, addictif, amuser, charabia, frauduleux, retombées, île, poche, aplatir, épave, dévastation, traumatisme, personnel, colère, conducteur, contrebandier, glandulaire, ordinateur. Mode, liquide, profiter, ambitieux, compliqué, campagne, forfaitaire, moulinet, culturel. Liqueur, les filles.*
>
> *Bien!*

Later, I noticed another thing. It started to happen as the event progressed in time and occupied more minds. To accommodate a larger amount of people new technologies had to be created, and a new language emerged—a sign language. It was, as my Romanian friend would say "Huge, Oleg, just huge!" People sat on the granite tiles of the square and signaled their thoughts about a specific issue of the moment. Agree, disagree, and not sure. The range of signs was limited, yet effective. Those who presented a particular topic on the public make-shift platform would wait for the reaction of the square. It was a direct communication, between thousands of people. One could see the totality of thoughts in a second; a raised hand was 'yes,' a fluttering hand was translated as 'maybe,' and no simply meant 'No.' The square was alive.

Then there were night concerts, improvised art galleries, and the Jazz. Hot Jazz flew in the night from a piece of large plastic wrapped around the light pole which was meant to be a

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tent, an Arabic desert tent. People would come in, and 'take off.' Five or seven musicians played trumpets, and percussions until they dropped dead. Then a new musician would take the stage, and the whole thing would start again. It was perpetual positivity, a celebration of life's best moments, and a reaction against life's darkest hours. Everybody was celebrating in a tent full of people, life, and music. It was the feast of living in Paris, and I will keep it.

I want to end this paper with infamous words were written by Jacques Derrida "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" (p.158) translated commonly as "There is nothing outside the text." My interpretation of Derrida's words, at this point, is the following; —*There is no outside text.*The event, the *Nuit debout* cannot be treated as something outside, present then and there, something that happened *only* at the *Place de la République* square. It is the very text people wrote with their limbs and their thoughts at the heart of life.

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