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# France's #Nuit Debout Social Movement: Young People Rising up and Moral Emotions

Sarah Pickard <sup>1,\*</sup> and Judith Bessant <sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institut du Monde Anglophone, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle—Paris 3, 75006 Paris, France

<sup>2</sup> School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC 3000, Australia

\* Correspondence: sarah.pickard@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr (S.P.); judith.bessant@rmit.edu.au (J.B.)

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**Abstract:** Set against a backdrop of austerity and neoliberal policies affecting many young people adversely, the *Nuit Debout* protest movement in France began in March 2016 when people gathered in public spaces to oppose the Socialist government's plan to introduce neoliberal labour legislation. Like other post-2008 movements, *Nuit Debout* was leaderless, non-hierarchical, and relied on social media for political communication and to mobilise participants. The *Nuit Debout* was also a movement inspired by powerful moral-political emotions such as righteous anger and hope. In this article, the authors address two questions. First, what features of *Nuit Debout* distinguished it from earlier social movements in France? Second, what role did moral emotions play in mobilising people to act as they did? Drawing on interviews with young protestors and their own testimonies, we argue that *Nuit Debout* was a distinctive form of protest for France. One distinguishing feature was the way young people—the “precarious generation”—were motivated by a strong sense of situated injustice, much of which related to what they saw as the unfairness of austerity policies, being deprived of a decent future and the feeling they had been betrayed by governments.

**Keywords:** young people; social movements; protest; political participation; austerity; moral-political emotions; precarity; labour laws; *Nuit Debout*; France

## 1. Introduction

“We are not going home tonight!” (“*On ne rentre pas chez nous!*”).<sup>1</sup> That is how the *Nuit Debout* protest movement started in France. Student unions and trade unions had organised a demonstration for 31 March 2016 to oppose a bill recently proposed by the Socialist government led by Prime Minister Manuel Valls on employment law reform. The legislation commonly referred to as the El Khomri law (*la loi El Khomri*) after Myriam El Khomri, the Minister for Labour would particularly affect young people within the labour market.<sup>2</sup> It triggered a series of demonstrations around the country leading to the big day of action on 31 March 2016. The Parisian procession took one of the customary routes, by starting at Place d'Italie—with student and trade union leaders at the head carrying traditional banners—and ending at Place de la Nation.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In this article, we have translated all French terms and quotes into English. All terms and quotes in French are in italics as are the names of French organisations.

<sup>2</sup> On 17 February 2016, Myriam Khomri presented to the State Council (*Conseil d'État*) the new “Bill to create new freedoms and new protections for companies and workers” (*Projet de loi visant à instituer de nouvelles libertés et de nouvelles protections pour les entreprises et les actifs*). It was a Socialist government led by Prime Minister Manuel Valls, François Hollande (the Socialist President) and the laws were introduced by Myriam El Khomri the Socialist Minister for Labour, Jobs, Professional Training and Social Dialogue (*Ministre du Travail, de l'Emploi, de la Formation professionnelle et du Dialogue social*).

<sup>3</sup> At the head of the march were union leaders: William Martinet, President of the biggest student union (*Union Nationale des Etudiants de France—Unef*) and trade union leaders Bernadette Groison (*Fédération Syndicale Unitaire—FSU*), Jean-Claude Mailly (*Force Ouvrière—FO*) and Philippe Martinez (*Confédération Générale du Travail—CGT*).

Some demonstrators, however, continued marching down the Boulevard Voltaire towards Place de la République, a square in the heart of the city with enormous symbolic significance. Centre stage of this large public space stands Léopold Morice's famous statue of Marianne, the French national symbol who embodies the victory of the French Revolution over the abuses of the power of the elite: the monarchy. Both the monument and the square itself represent the fundamental post-1789 French republican values of freedom, equality and fraternity, along with the revolutionary spirit. It was a spirit channelled by a group of protestors stating they wanted to "overthrow the El Khomri law and the world it represents". It had already been decided before the march that more was needed to express their discontent, something that would "frighten" the government. From these sentiments came the powerful declaration: "We are not going home tonight!" In this way, the Place de la République was occupied, as participants stayed up through the night, taking part in debates and taking to social media about *Nuit Debout*, which can be translated into English as "Rise up at night", "Stand up at night", or "Up all night".<sup>4</sup> It was action that soon spread to other towns across France [1] and other countries, signifying the advent of a new social movement in which young people were central actors.

*Nuit Debout* sits within a wider youth-led movement triggered by austerity and experiences of precarity often expressed and communicated through social media [2]. *Nuit Debout* can also be understood as part of global protest action precipitated by the 2008 global financial crisis in which young people played a key role. This is evident in the similarity of the issues contested and the protest methods used. Yet as a social movement, *Nuit Debout* has been considerably less studied than its predecessors, especially in the non-French-speaking world.

In this article, we describe and explain the *Nuit Debout* movement, focussing on the crucial role played by young participants and their moral-political emotions. We first provide a brief contextual account of the political situation in France that provoked the *Nuit Debout* movement. We then document the key characteristics of the protest and the fundamental roles played by young people. The focus then shifts to the novelty of the *Nuit Debout* movement in a nation renowned for political protest. Attention is given to the role of moral emotions that were an important feature of the movement. In doing this, we address the following questions:

1. What key features of *Nuit Debout* distinguished it from earlier social movements in France?
2. What was the role of moral-political emotions in the mobilising and shaping the *Nuit Debout* movement?

We argue that *Nuit Debout* was an innovative and distinctive form of protest for France, in which moral-political emotions played a critical role.

## 2. Methodology

In this article, we seek to highlight the voices of the young participants of *Nuit Debout*. To do so, we draw on interviews with young participants and their own testimonies. These come from a variety of printed and online first and secondary source material. Many quotes come from books produced by collectives of young participants shortly after the end of *Nuit Debout*, for example, Ref. [3] #32MARS. Some of the quotes from young participants come from extracts of interviews made during *Nuit Debout* by the independent media company Mediapart that are available online. We also use insider accounts taken from interviews with young participants published in English and French

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<sup>4</sup> "*Nuit Debout*" has been translated into English in different ways, including "Rise up at night", and "Up all night". In the French, the significance is not to accept the proposed law lying down, but to stand up or rise up against it and protest all night long. The name had to be found quickly and initial suggestions, such as "*Nuit Rouge*" ("Red Night") were rejected in favour of one that had fewer connotations with traditional political parties and political factions. There was a general consensus that "*Nuit Debout*" should exist outside of traditional political groupings. The term "*debout*" features in the first lines of the revolutionary song by Eugène Pottier (1871) "*L'Internationale*": "*Debout! l'âme du prolétaire. Travailleurs, groupons-nous enfin. Debout! les damnés de la terre! Debout! les forçats de la faim! ...*" In the English version, *Debout!* is translated as "Stand up!".

newspapers. Background information and insider accounts are cited from interviews with participants carried out by the authors in July 2018.

Material produced in numerous social media posts that were made during the movement by young participants is also used. Many of the texts (manifestoes, testimonies and articles, etc.) produced during *Nuit Debout* are published in *Nuit Debout: Les Textes* [4]. Other references are made to a special issue on the *Nuit Debout* in the French academic journal *Les Temps Modernes* [5] (for further information see footnotes and reference list). Finally, one of the authors of this article was an independent observer of the *Nuit Debout* in Paris. For the economic data we mostly use official French statistics from the *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques* (Insee) and the *Institut national de la jeunesse et de l'éducation populaire* (Injep).

### 3. The Background to *Nuit Debout*: Neoliberal Labour Law

When François Hollande became President of the French Republic on 6 May 2012, in his victory speech, he announced young people and justice would be his priority and that he should be judged at the end of his term in office on what he had done for French youth [6]. As a President from the Socialist Party, his pledge gave hope to a generation of young people many of whom were experiencing difficult social-economic conditions characterised by precarity after the global financial crisis and five years of the right-wing presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy from 2007 to 2012 [7]. However, from 2012 onwards, the situation for most young people in France worsened [8]. Youth unemployment was more than 20% for under-25-year-olds [9], housing was generally unaffordable, youth poverty was increasing [10,11] and, as a result, many young people felt their future was dim [12]. In short, despite the presidential election promises, the young generation in France could realistically expect living standards and opportunities to be worse than their parents [13].

Many young people were experiencing a declining standard of living with downward social mobility: in French “*déclassement*” [14–16]. It was a situation that could be explained in part by the fact that young people also experienced lower levels of public spending than did their elders when they were young [10,17], as part of the Socialist government’s austerity measures. Moreover, at the time, France was undergoing an official national “state of emergency” announced by President of the Republic François Hollande soon after the terrorist attacks of 13 November 2015. That decree granted special power to the government within a national security frame, authorising the executive to use repressive policies and rely on actions not permitted in normal circumstances. These included restrictions on public gatherings and increases in police powers.

On 23 February 2016, during a public meeting at the Parisian Labour Exchange (“*Bourse du travail*”), there was a premier screening of a low budget documentary film “*Merci Patron!*” (“Thanks Boss!”) [18]. It was directed by François Ruffin, founder and Editor in Chief of an independent and alternative quarterly newspaper popular with left-wing activists: *Fakir* [19]. The film is critical of the ultra-wealthy, the use of foreign labour and the outsourcing of French jobs; it depicts a couple sacked by their billionaire boss Bernard Arnault and their bid to seek reparations. According to *Fakir*, the film was part of the struggle against “the oligarchy” and the purpose of the public meeting was to bring together activists for them to air their various grievances against the French government.

It was also decided at that public meeting to try and “scare” the French political leaders [20] by going on a traditional protest street march, but then not to go home afterwards. The date set for this was 31 March 2016 because demonstrations organised by youth organisations and trade unions were already planned for then to protest against the El Khomri labour law. As a result, it was announced in *Fakir* that a “Red Night” (“*Nuit Rouge*”) would take place on 31 March 2016, when a central public square would be occupied, when the film *Merci Patron!* would be screened and most importantly, when people would get together and talk. Those interested were asked to publicise the event by distributing a downloadable flyer [21] that could be handed out notably on 17 March 2016 when there would be other demonstrations against the draft labour legislation. In further preparation, a multitude of social media accounts were set up using different names, for example, “*On vaut mieux que ça*”,

("We are worth more than this") and "*Convergences des Luttés*" ("A meeting of struggles"). Added to these were teasers about the future event posted on a new YouTube channel with the slogan "We are not going home!" ("*On ne rentre pas chez nous!*") with links to the Twitter hashtags #NuitRouge, #NuitDebout and #RêveGénérale.<sup>5</sup>

Naming the event "*Nuit Rouge*" ("Red Night") quickly lost popularity because the colour red was seen to denote traditional left-wing political organisations. In this way, "*Nuit Rouge*" became "*Nuit Debout*" ("Rise up at a Night" or "Stand up at Night") in a bid to communicate the idea of inclusiveness, that people from different backgrounds with a variety of claims would come together to challenge the labour law and other issues of concern.

The labour legislation that student and trade unions (especially *Unef* and *CGT*)<sup>6</sup> and the *Nuit Debout* movement were responding to was part of a neoliberal policy agenda. It was legislation first put forward on 17 February 2016 by the Socialist government of Prime Minister Manuel Valls (under a French Socialist President François Hollande). According to the government, the bill was drawn up to 'modernise' labour legislation and decrease unemployment: its provisional name was "Act to overhaul labour law and increase collective bargaining" (*Refondre le droit du travail et donner plus de poids à la négociation collective*). It was also legislation designed to circumvent long-standing collective bargaining processes and to reduce protective regulatory requirements meaning companies would be able to dismiss staff more easily and enact other changes that weakened the capacity of trade unions to represent workers.<sup>7</sup>

It was legislation justified by the government as a "need" to "modernise" the labour market and bring it into the twenty-first century, to enhance competitiveness, which it was argued would strengthen the economy. According to the government, this would create greater workplace "flexibility". In these ways, it was similar to neoliberal legislation introduced decades earlier in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. However, for many young people, the fact that such legislation was introduced by a Socialist government and President Hollande who had made promises to make them a priority and alleviate the adversities they were experiencing enhanced their sense of injustice. (The effect of this disillusionment was later to be expressed as a withdrawal of support on the part of many young people for the Socialist Party in the 2017 Presidential elections).

For many decades, France had been somewhat resistant to what became an almost unified system of Anglo-American neoliberalism. For example, France's tax revenue remained historically high, one of the highest in the world, it had negligible university fees, and a substantial number of people employed by the state (public sector workers). It seems that 2016 marked something of a watershed, when France's political elite decided to pursue a neoliberal policy and push through the *El Khomri law*.

Although the legislation took the name of Myriam El Khomri, the Minister for Labour, key figures behind the reform were Manuel Valls the Prime Minister and Emmanuel Macron the Minister for the Economy and Industry (who would go on to leave the Socialist Party, form *En Marche* and become French President in 2017).<sup>8</sup> Significantly, the labour reform was also central to the government's wider austerity plans.

Despite the *Nuit Debout* protest actions that had been occurring for nearly six weeks in Place de la République and elsewhere around the country, and despite opposition to the law by colleagues within the ruling Socialist Party, on 10 May 2016, Prime Minister Manuel Valls announced the government

<sup>5</sup> "*Rêve générale*" ("national dream") is a slogan that is often used in French demonstrations. It is a play on words with "*grève nationale*" ("national strike").

<sup>6</sup> Leaders of the *CGT* trade union are public and media figures. The leader of the *CGT* at the time of *Nuit Debout* was Philippe Martinez.

<sup>7</sup> For a longer explanation in English of the contents of the labour legislation see [22] (Birch, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Macron was Minister for the Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs (*ministre de l'Economie, de l'industrie et du numérique*) from August 2014 to August 2016 when he resigned. He founded a new political party *En Marche* in April 2016 and a year later he was elected President of the French Republic in May 2017.

would force the passage of the bill. This was done by using exceptional constitutional provisions that saw the bill pass through the Lower House, the National Assembly (“*Assemblée Nationale*”) without a vote, using Article 49.3 of the French Constitution of the Fifth Republic.<sup>9</sup> The bill thus went straight to the Upper House, the Senate (“*Sénat*”) where Article 49.3 was invoked again and the bill was passed by the Lower House on 21 July 2016 without a vote. It was then approved by the Constitutional Council (“*Conseil Constitutionnel*”) on 4 August 2016. In this way, the new labour legislation became law on 8 August 2016, five months after it was originally presented to Parliament.<sup>10</sup> The fact the government resorted to using exceptional constitutional provisions to avoid normal voting practice is indicative of both what was at stake and of its determination to force the new labour law through Parliament [25].

In short, the labour legislation introduced into the French Parliament by a Socialist government was a classic representation of the neoliberal worldview. It was such governmental action that motivated people to engage collectively to form and sustain the *Nuit Debout* protest over several weeks, until the legislation was passed.

#### 4. *Nuit Debout*: A Different Kind of Social Movement for France

France has a long and rich history of social movements involving street protests and occupations of public sites that played and continue to play a fundamental role in popular political action. The dramatic events of May 1968 that involved strikes and demonstrations, as well as the occupation of universities and factories is an important part of the social, cultural, and political history of France. The student-led “*Mai ‘68*” holds a special somewhat nostalgic place in the hearts and minds of many French people. It has been argued by some that “*Mai ‘68*” marked the end of traditional collective actions and ushered in new social movements within postmodern politics [26]. In the early twenty-first century, two youth-led protest movements in France focussed on issues pertaining specifically to young people. In 2005, there were protests against a new first job contract for young people (*Contrat première embauche—CPE*), called the “*mouvement anti-CPE*”. This was followed in 2009, by substantial protests against extensive higher education reforms, called the “*mouvement anti-LRU*”. In this way, both actions were protests against reforms that effected the lives of many young people directly and they involved traditional demonstrations and occupations of universities for weeks, recalling methods used in “*Mai ‘68*”. Importantly, the protests obtained certain concessions from the government.

Almost half a century after “*Mai ‘68*”, the *Nuit Debout* movement emerged from traditional left-wing initiators, organisers and participants of protests in France. However, a decision was made

<sup>9</sup> The use by French Socialist Prime Minister Manuel Valls of this constitutional device is an example of what David Dyzenhaus (2009) [23] calls a “legal black hole,” which enabled the Government, to avoid Parliamentary scrutiny of the El Khomri law, and possible parliamentary defeat. Article 49.3 of the French Constitution of the 5th Republic reads as follows:

*“Le Premier ministre, après délibération du Conseil des ministres, engage devant l’Assemblée nationale la responsabilité du gouvernement sur son programme ou éventuellement sur une déclaration de politique générale.*

*L’Assemblée nationale met en cause la responsabilité du Gouvernement par le vote d’une motion de censure. Une telle motion n’est recevable que si elle est signée par un dixième au moins des membres de l’Assemblée nationale. Le vote ne peut avoir lieu que quarante-huit heures après son dépôt. Seuls sont recensés les votes favorables à la motion de censure qui ne peut être adoptée qu’à la majorité des membres composant l’Assemblée. Sauf dans le cas prévu à l’alinéa ci-dessous, un député ne peut être signataire de plus de trois motions de censure au cours d’une même session ordinaire et de plus d’une au cours d’une même session extraordinaire.*

*Le Premier ministre peut, après délibération du Conseil des ministres, engager la responsabilité du Gouvernement devant l’Assemblée nationale sur le vote d’un projet de loi de finances ou de financement de la sécurité sociale. Dans ce cas, ce projet est considéré comme adopté, sauf si une motion de censure, déposée dans les vingt-quatre heures qui suivent, est votée dans les conditions prévues à l’alinéa précédent. Le Premier ministre peut, en outre, recourir à cette procédure pour un autre projet ou une proposition de loi par session. Le Premier ministre a la faculté de demander au Sénat l’approbation d’une déclaration de politique générale.”*

<sup>10</sup> Loi n° 2016-1088 du 8 août 2016, *Loi relative au travail, à la modernisation du dialogue social et à la sécurisation des parcours professionnels* [24].

during the public meeting held at the Parisian Labour Exchange in February 2016 to do things differently, in order to really “scare” the Socialist government. The aim was to act in an alternative way:

“We are not demanding anything, we are building new ways of doing politics. Politicians have transformed politics into something reserved for professionals and experts, like neurology, econometrics, anthropology” [3] (pp. 27–28).<sup>11</sup>

In what follows, we identify certain characteristics of *Nuit Debout* that distinguish it from earlier French protests. It is a distinction that owes much to desire of young participants to do politics differently, in response to what they saw as the failures of the ruling Socialist government and its predecessors. The first feature of *Nuit Debout* that distinguished it from earlier French social action was its leaderless and horizontal character with a *modus operandi* centred on participatory democracy and a “meeting of struggles”. *Nuit Debout* was born from a popular will to oppose the labour law and austerity policies. Participants also wanted to do politics differently. Second, it was primarily young people who provided much of the energy and impetus. They occupied public spaces in Paris and other French towns, they used new technologies to oppose neoliberal and austerity policies, to recruit, to communicate with supporters and to mobilise support off and online.

(a) *A leaderless horizontal social movement and participative democracy*

Several key features of *Nuit Debout* distinguished it from earlier French social movements. First, it was a deliberately leaderless social movement with no official head, director, or president. This was almost unprecedented in France’s history of social movements. Although the activist and editor of *Fakir*, François Ruffin was the initial momentum behind *Nuit Debout* with his film *Merci Patron!* (“Thanks Boss!”) and through the exercise of his media power, after the movement started, he stepped back. *Nuit Debout* also had no official spokespeople who claimed to speak for all, nor were there any official representatives. In order to uphold the democratic principles of equity and to avoid one or a few leaders becoming the primary focus of the movement, *Nuit Debout* was intentionally leaderless, something that made it quite different to earlier French popular political action.

It was more of a non-hierarchical and horizontal movement [27] (Gérard and Simonpoli, 2016, p. 15) with “participants” (“*NuitDeboutistes*”) fully engaged in a direct democratic practice. The idea was that “*Nuit Debout* belonged to everyone”; it was public property such as the public spaces that were occupied. It was an approach intended to ensure primary attention was given to the issues of concern in the “meeting of struggles” (“*convergence des Luttes*”), by avoiding the distractions of a leadership struggle or faction fighting that tend to affect traditional political organisations (see below).

Instead of a leader and spokespeople, there were several “action committees” or “task forces” (“*commissions*”), such as the “Communication committee” (“*Commission de communication*”) and the “Democracy in the Square committee” (“*Commission démocratie sur la place—DSL*”) who deliberated collectively.<sup>12</sup> Participants in these committees changed on a rolling basis in a conscious effort to share tasks and not have prominent permanent leaders. In a further bid to enlarge democratic participatory practice, several “sub-task forces” or “sub-action committees” (“*sous-commissions*”) and inter-task forces (“*inter-commissions*”) were established.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, members of the “action committees” declined to make mainstream media appearances in an official capacity or as spokespeople [30], for example, they did not go on television to be interviewed, or take part in media debates. A rare broadcast was a filmed of a group discussion involving *Nuit Debout* participants with a journalist

<sup>11</sup> Ref. [3] #32MARS, 2016, pp. 27–28: “*Nous ne revendiquons rien, nous construisons de nouvelles manières de faire la politique. Les policier.ne.s l’ont transformée en une discipline réservée aux professionnel.le.s et aux expert.e.s comme la neurologie, l’économétrie ou l’anthropologie.*”

<sup>12</sup> For a full list of all the *Nuit Debout* commissions, see the *Nuit Debout* website. Available online: <https://nuitdebout.fr/paris/commissions/dslp> [28].

<sup>13</sup> The way the different commissions worked and other aspects of how *Nuit Debout* functioned can be observed in the documentary film by Marina Otero called *L’Assemblée* [29].

from Mediapart [31,32] (Mediapart, 2016a, 2016b), an independent (alternative) advert-free media organisation. Notably, Mediapart carries out investigative journalism that has revealed high level French political corruption and it is behind FrenchLeaks [33].

These deliberate endeavours to create a different structure and have a different relationship with the mainstream media made *Nuit Debout* stand out from earlier social movements in France. Leaderless horizontal movements have been uncommon in France as most have been the product of well-ordered and well-practised traditional “Leftist” organisations: trade unions, student unions and political parties that are behind most protest actions. These long-established organisations dating back well before “*Mai '68*” have strong figureheads who call and direct protest actions and who are familiar faces in French mainstream media. It is an organisational practice that has seen many leaders caught-up in their own career advancement and struggles for various capitals. *Nuit Debout* hoped to avoid this and wanted the media to pay attention to the movement itself and the issues at stake:

“We are over-taking the traditional activist milieu and we are obliging the media to talk about us” [3] (#32MARS, 2016, p. 42).<sup>14</sup>

Participants in *Nuit Debout* tried to avoid reproducing what they saw as features of traditional politics such as the way members of social movements were co-opted and came to be part of the political elite.<sup>15</sup> This aversion to “older style politics” explains why the customary banners, flags and emblems that identify particular political institutions, such as student unions, trade unions and political parties were barely evident. This reaction against “traditional” politics was grounded in feelings of betrayal, in part given it was a Socialist government that initiated the labour law reform. This sense that *Nuit Debout* stood independent and not linked to any political organisation or union and was re-affirmed during the movement [30], something that appealed to many young people who had not previously been activists:

“I think it is important that we can speak with each other today and that we are not in a movement that is individualistic, but rather in a community spirited movement. That is how we can take things forward, by being strong together and standing together” [36] (Lisa, young student, *Nuit Debout* participant, Mediapart, 9 April 2016).<sup>16</sup>

The absence of formal leaders and official representatives in *Nuit Debout* can also be understood as a way those involved in the movement could avoid sanctioning the development of a powerful and domineering political elite found in the conventional political culture. Such culture was embodied by Manuel Valls the French Prime Minister when he introduced a major neoliberal ‘reform’ such as the El Khomri labour law. For many participants in *Nuit Debout*, this symbolised a positive move away from what they thought had become a corrupt and stultifying political system:

“I like all the changes *Nuit Debout* could bring about. In our minds, the movement makes things possible that have seemed impossible for years” [36].<sup>17</sup>

This rejection of traditional politics in favour of more participatory democratic practice was summed up in a declaration featured in an edition of the *Nuit Debout* online daily gazette [37]:

<sup>14</sup> “Nous dépassons les cercles militants traditionnels et obligeons les médias à parler de nous.”

<sup>15</sup> Fewer than eight per cent of the French workforce are unionised (compared to nearly 25% in Britain and almost 30% in the European Union) a significant decrease since the 1980 when around 30 per cent of employees were members of a trade union [34–36] (The Economist, 2014; Andolfatto and Labbé, 2012; Pignoni, 2016). The right to strike was introduced into the French constitution in 1946, which means workers can stop working to make professional and social claims.

<sup>16</sup> “Je pense que c’est important aujourd’hui de parler à chacun pour que l’on ne soit pas dans un mouvement individualiste, mais vraiment dans un mouvement communautaire. C’est comme ça que l’on fait avancer les choses c’est en étant soudé et en étant solidaire.”

<sup>17</sup> “J’aime aussi voilà tout le changement que cela pourrait apporter. J’ai l’impression que dans les consciences, ça rend possible toutes les choses qui ont l’air impossible depuis de nombreuses années.”

“Politics is not just the business of professional politicians, it is everyone’s business” [38].<sup>18</sup>

The horizontal organisation of *Nuit Debout* can also be understood as an attempt to create a more egalitarian political movement consistent with republican values expressed in France that references the 1789 French Revolution and the French national motto: “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*”. This horizontal model epitomised a French republican tradition centred on solidarity, egalitarianism, and direct democracy, where everybody’s voice counted and was respected.

Thus, *Nuit Debout* exemplified how large numbers of predominantly—but not exclusively—young people took politics into their own hands by occupying public spaces, by demanding social justice and a more genuine public dialogue. A central aim was to encourage more inclusive public debate and decision-making.

Another feature of the *Nuit Debout* movement was the nature of its claims and aims. While the draft labour law legislation was the initial catalyst for the *Nuit Debout*, as the movement progressed, young participants were engaged actively by online posting testimonies about their poor working conditions and other grievances via “*On vaut mieux que ça*” (we are worth more than this) (see below). Very quickly *Nuit Debout* became “a meeting” or “a union of struggles” (“*une convergence des luttes*”), in which a plurality of complaints, claims and hopes were expressed. Like all social movements in France, the daily ritual of a General Assembly (*Assemblée Générale*) was an important feature (6 p.m.–8 p.m.) of *Nuit Debout*. The use of silent hand signs (“silent jazz hands” or “democracy-saving hand gestures”) were also employed, which saw participants communicating by wagging their hands in the air to agree and crossing arms to disagree, etc. using traditional Sign language.<sup>19</sup> While this silent gesturing helped avoid disturbing or interrupting speakers, it also strengthened the role of political emotions by adding to a sense of solidarity and feelings of belonging among participants. Such communication practices employed during *Nuit Debout* were a legacy of earlier French youth-led protests such as those in 2005 and 2009 (see above) and were also inspired by the *Indignados* protest movements, as Felicetti and della Porta argue: “In developing its repertoire, *Nuit Debout* drew consistently from the repertoires of action, organizational models and frames brought from previous similar movements [2] (p. 12).

Participants occupying Place de République took turns in speaking for a fixed short period on subjects of their choice that typically moved well beyond the labour law:

“This movement is not the usual thing about politics and politicians; we can meet other people and it is really beautiful. It shows us that there is still hope, [ . . . ] that we can change things. [ . . . ] The labour law was the straw that broke the camel’s back. [ . . . ] But what brought me here is about much much more than just labour legislation” [36].<sup>20</sup>

The issues debated in *Nuit Debout* assemblies included the universal basic income, equitable housing policies, education, corporate tax evasion, debt forgiveness, housing inequality, immigration, refugees, transport, the environment, feminism, registering invalid votes in elections, and reforming the constitution, among many others. These debates highlighted a sense of popular disenchantment with the power elite and a disconnect between the government and the people, which was especially strong among many young people. At the same time, *Nuit Debout* debates reflected an optimism and hope that “ordinary people” create “a better world”, one that was less individualistic and more valuing of common goods. As Juliette a young student commented:

“In the beginning, when all the marches started, I was a bit sceptical because I thought once again people were demonstrating to defend their own interests and protect their own

<sup>18</sup> “La politique n’est pas une affaire de professionnels, c’est l’affaire de tous.”

<sup>19</sup> The different commissions and the “democracy saving hand gestures” (“*les gestes qui sauvent la démocratie*”) used during *Nuit Debout* are available online: [https://wiki.nuitdebout.fr/wiki/Ressources/Les\\_gestes\\_Nuit\\_Debout](https://wiki.nuitdebout.fr/wiki/Ressources/Les_gestes_Nuit_Debout) [39].

<sup>20</sup> “Ce mouvement qui sort un peu de la logique strictement politique / politiciens qui permet de se rencontrer du monde [ . . . ] cette logique-là est très belle. J’ai encore de l’espoir [ . . . ] que l’on puisse encore changer des choses. [ . . . ] La loi du travail ça a été la goutte qui a fait déborder la vase [ . . . ] ce qui me fait venir ici ça va largement au-delà de la loi du travail.”

rights. [ . . . ] But I saw that a new kind of movement was being created [ . . . ] things were created that were less negative and more positive. [ . . . ] I said to myself, ‘fab’ because in this movement there are no trade unions, no political parties. [ . . . ] nobody is at the top” [36].<sup>21</sup>

In these ways we saw in *Nuit Debout* a more democratic organisational structure combined with an interest in doing politics differently, something that was especially apparent among young participants, a point we consider further in the next section.

(b) *A youth-led movement reinventing political participation*

It is a popular view within French mainstream media and in certain sections of academia that young people are politically disengaged, de-politicised and politically apathetic because they tend to have lower electoral turnout rates than older citizens [16]. Yet for Anne Muxel (a French specialist on young people and political participation), many young people in France are political, but in ways that are less traditional and ways that are more “expressive” and more “emotional” [16] (p. 34).

Contrary to the idea young people were politically disengaged, young participants in *Nuit Debout* were critical of what they saw as exclusionary practices and hierarchical decision-making, which discouraged their engagement and locked them out of participation in electoral politics. They wanted greater involvement and not simply just to be the object of policy or government directives.

*Nuit Debout* provided opportunities for young people to circumvent conventional electoral politics [13]. As mentioned, interest in doing so owed much to a sense of disillusionment with the traditional political elite and what many saw as the failure of successive governments to act responsibly and to be genuinely inclusive of young people. In this way, *Nuit Debout* provides a convincing example of how many young people are assuming the responsibility of positive freedom themselves and inventing new forms of political action or political participation [40]. In *Nuit Debout*, we saw young people enacting “Do-It-Ourselves politics” (DIO politics) [41] outside traditional political organisations (political parties and unions). Importantly, young participants commented that they were fed up with what they saw as the staid and self-interested traditional French political culture and associated expectations. As one young participant explained:

“For the ‘experts in the media’, *Nuit Debout* had to lead to something concrete, to bring an answer to what was going to happen in the next election, to create a structure. [ . . . ] In our world, anything that does not create something is considered a failure. We [at *Nuit Debout*] refuse this kind of logic that we have been locked into up until now. *Nuit Debout* is building a network, a common culture. Trust is its engine and momentum. It is sustainable and renewable” [3] (pp. 31–32).<sup>22</sup>

The desire to reinvent politics and develop alternative political participation processes along with a new model of society, citizenship and a constitution was a central dynamic at work in this collective of youthful hopes and dreams [42]. With all this in mind, we challenge representations of young people as disinterested in politics or as only being interested in politics when it affects them directly.

*Nuit Debout* revealed a popular dissatisfaction with conventional politics and was testimony to a strong interest in developing new forms of non-institutional and institutional politics. It is something also apparent in other countries, for example, in the United Kingdom, where Momentum played a role making the Corbyn-led Labour Party popular among young people and the formation of certain electoral politics [43]. The same observations can be made about Spain with *Podemos* (“We can”) and in

<sup>21</sup> “A l’origine, moi, quand les manifestations ont commencé, j’ai été un peu sceptique parce que j’avais l’impression qu’encore une fois c’étaient des gens qui venaient manifester pour leurs intérêts, pour défendre leurs droits personnels. [ . . . ] Mais, j’ai vu un nouveau mouvement se créer [ . . . ] des choses qui se sont créées qui ne sont plus négatives mais positives [ . . . ] Je me disais ‘chouette’ parce que dans ce mouvement, il n’y a pas de syndicats, il n’y a pas de partis politiques. [ . . . ] Personne chapote le mouvement.”

<sup>22</sup> Ref. [3] #32MARS, 2016, pp. 31–32: “Pour les éditocrates, *Nuit Debout* se devait d’aboutir à quelque chose de concret, d’apporter une réponse aux prochaines échéances électorales, de créer une structure.”

the United States with Bernie Sanders, a socialist Democrat candidate, in the run up to 2016 Presidential electoral campaign. With this in mind, we argue that *Nuit Debout* is part of a larger political change process being shaped primarily by growing numbers of young people motivated by feelings of injury and grievance as well as outrage in the face of policies that frustrated them from pursuing a promised future. Young people in France were not alone in feeling outraged and wanting to protest.

The *Nuit Debout* movement followed and was inspired by earlier anti-austerity protest and democratic deficit protest around the world [44]. Mobilised by the similar issues that particularly affected young people and using similar tactics, we saw a communication or sharing and transfer of various practices across the globe.<sup>23</sup> *participants felt part of the global wave of protests and “Nuit Debout shared [ . . . ] important features with previous anti-austerity mobilizations”.*

Young people played central and formative role in the way *Nuit Debout* was represented to online world. For France, such online action initially against the El Khomri labour law and then with the mobilisation of *Nuit Debout* was unprecedented [59]. The communicative power of the Internet was evident from the outset. The labour reform bill was first reported in the mainstream media on 16 February 2016, and within two days, an online e-petition calling for the withdrawal of the labour law was launched on [www.change.org](http://www.change.org) [60]. As part of an activist and trade union movement the e-petition “*Loi Travail: non, merci!*” (“Labour Law: No Thanks!”) was created on 18 February 2016 by Caroline De Haas (born 1980), former leader of the French national union of students (*Unef*) (2006–2009). The e-petition generated immediate and widespread interest, producing an unprecedented million signatures in just over a fortnight [61]. This unparalleled popular response to the e-petition indicates the degree to which many opposed the law reform. This extraordinary success of the online e-petition led the Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, to delay the initial presentation of the bill to the Cabinet, i.e., the Council of Ministers (“*Conseil des ministres*”) from 9 March to 24 March 2016 [62]. At the same time, a website [63] <https://loitravail.lol> (“Labour Law Lol”) was created by a collective of unionists and activists that documented the main aspects of the planned El Khomri law with links to the e-petition for people to sign online.

In the same week, the online e-petition was launched, a collective of young YouTubers also formed “*On vaut mieux que ça*” (“We are worth more than this”) and posted their first video on a new YouTube channel [64]. The channel was accompanied by a new website [65], a Facebook page [66] a Twitter account [67] and other social media platforms. The primary purpose of all this action was to communicate “warnings” about the labour bill; it was to collect online testimonies documenting how young people were taken advantage of in the labour market and to provide insight into the precarious nature of their employment. The YouTubers collective first posted a video clip that encouraged peers to post on Twitter using the hashtag #Onvautmieux and to submit “witness statements” on the dedicated website [65]. Many were also published in an online book format [68]. Initiated by “a collective of creative citizens” with the aim of “freeing speech on societal problems, such as work,” the participants emphasised they were not spokespeople for an organisation or movement, but rather “triggers for words” (“*déclencheurs de paroles*”), enabling and facilitating the assemblage of authentic and legitimate prose.<sup>24</sup>

Twitter hashtags such as #Convergencesdeslutttes and social media sites for *Convergences des Lutttes* played a vital role in political communication. Indeed, during *Nuit Debout* they were critical for informing, mobilising and sharing information and ideas:

<sup>23</sup> For example, we saw the direct communication and transmission of practices from Iceland in 2008, to Cairo, Egypt to Spain [45–49] (Castañeda, 2012, 2014; Eklundh, 2014; Portos and Masuallo, 2017; van de Velde, 2018), to Greece [50] (Kioupiolis and Pechtelidis, 2017) to the United States [44,51] and the United Kingdom [52,53], Chile and Quebec [54–56], then Hong Kong [57] and Turkey [58]. Young people in France were part of a “precarious generation”, experiencing what the French call “*déclassement*” and their discontent [14,16,17].

<sup>24</sup> Significantly, the twitter #Onvautmieux launched on 24 February 2016 was a precursor to #metoo (October 2017), whereby people denounce behaviour via tweets. The French version of #metoo was also launched in October 2017: #balancetonporc (“squeal on the pig”).

“Let’s post videos online like those who used to stick posters on the walls of our towns. Let’s use the Internet to share this burst of freedom with the whole world and let’s be inspired by their methods. Let’s make the most of the democratisation of encryption to share without being spied on and let’s surprise them” [3] (p. 44).<sup>25</sup>

Another novel use of media initiated by *Nuit Debout* saw Rémy Buisine use his smartphone to set up live video broadcasts of the daily General Assemblies at Place de la République via the app Periscope [69]. This enabled thousands of people to watch the Periscope broadcasts—with an estimated 80,000 people viewing the Assemblies during the first week [70]. According to the 25-year-old, the audience for his *Nuit Debout* Periscope broadcasts was “quite young, from teenagers to young people around twenty-years-olds” [71]. At the same time, the *Nuit Debout* website was linked to numerous social media platforms such as Bambuser, Instagram, Tumblr, Snapchat, Scoop.it, and Reddit.

*Nuit Debout* was different to earlier social movements in France that conformed to a hierarchical organisational model. This was evident, for example, in the way *Nuit Debout* was organised horizontally and the ways participants very deliberately did not rely on official leaders. It was also distinctive in the ways the movement occupied town squares and public spaces for weeks and in the ways it made extensive use of digital technologies to reach out to the French people more generally and to inform public opinion, a feature reflecting the capacity of young people to engage with new media [72]. Many of these young participants were also deeply affected by political and moral emotions.

### 5. *Nuit Debout* and Political-Moral Emotions

Political or moral emotions play a critical role in politics generally and in protest action in particular. Yet as Philippe Braud argues, they are often overlooked [73]. Political emotions are worth paying attention to because they are a source of politically significant moral energy. Moral or political emotions such as patriotism, righteous anger, collective pride, resentment or hope work to create a sense of solidarity or connection derived from the building and sharing of commitments to “things that matter”. Emotions are interwoven with moral values, and sometimes arise from a sense of anger or injustice about perceived infractions of moral rules [74] (see also [75]). As Randall Collins [76], observes, emotional energy is also what charges feeling of enthusiasm and the confidence needed to take initiative and engage politically.

James Jasper [77] highlights the pleasure, pride and sense of hope we experience when we express ourselves and our moral position when participating in collective actions such as protests. For Mary Holmes, anger “is the essential political emotion because it is a response to perceived injustice” [78]. Simon Thompson agrees: “The experience of anger is evidence of perceived injustice, and thus it gives people the impetus to engage in collective action in order to overcome this injustice” [79] (see also [80]), [81]. For della Porta “hot cognition” like a sense of injustice may well be extremely important for mobilisation, but it also needs an attribution of responsibility to concrete targets, successfully bridging the abstract and the concrete” [44] (see also [80–82]). Moral or political emotions such as anger and outrage are often what characterise protest action. It can, for example, be that felt sense of injustice provoked by governments promoting austerity policies after 2009, played a key role in mobilising collective action.

Moral emotions are also important in the construction of solidarities involving people working collectively to achieve what they see as important social or collective goods. Such emotions contribute to a powerful a sense of identity, belonging and camaraderie that is typical of much collective action. Participants in this study report how they enjoyed the experience of bonding with people through

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<sup>25</sup> “Postons des vidéos en ligne comme celles et ceux qui nous ont précédé.e.s collaient des pamphlets sur les murs de leurs villes. Utilisons le web pour partager les élans de liberté du monde entier et inspirons-nous de leurs méthodes. Profitons de la démocratisation du cryptage pour échanger sans être surveillé.e.s et provoquer l’effet de surprise”.

shared rituals and songs, identifying heroes and villains, and by developing a consensus about who are their friends and enemies. In these ways, protests reinforce a sense of shared “gratification and solidarity-building” [83]. The pleasure of creating and sharing perspectives, beliefs and building solidarity is vital for mobilizing and sustaining protest action [84]. Political-moral emotions can also become a central to one’s individual and group identity and help create through what Durkheim called “collective effervescence” that made “collective consciousness” possible [85,86].

We now turn to the issue of moral or political and ethical emotions to argue that paying attention to how they shape social movements is critical for understanding how and why *Nuit Debout* came about. Doing this involves moving away from the normative practices of *conventional* political science understood as a liberal normative account of the political, which relies on rational-action explanations.

In referring to a liberal project, we refer to narratives that are part of a liberal tradition [87,88], which emphasise ideas that people are rational, utility calculating, freedom seeking autonomous agents and political is an aggregate of those individual dispositions. From these accounts of human action came powerful narratives about representative democracy that rely on the assumption that the political or politics is technical action.<sup>26</sup> This conventional liberal frame has informed mainstream political science and sociology. We argue *against* the idea central to this mainstream tradition that for human action to be *political*, it needs to be motivated by “individual” rational intention. Instead, we argue that paying attention to the role of political emotions helps appreciate what moved many young people to participate in *Nuit Debout*.

We are also critical of claims made by its proponents that political science is a neutral science, which describes or reports on what is there in “politics” [89,90]. We also argue that such claims are not defensible.

As highlighted in Hannah Arendt’s account [91] of human action, most political action is not so much a form instrumental rational action (“*techne*”), but a form of *praxis*. As such, it involves a combination of ethical-political-emotional “principles” or “virtues”. Moreover, critics of conventional Political Scientists such as Mark Petracca [92] and Daniel Kahneman [93] demonstrate how political and economic decisions are rarely “rational”. Political decisions including those made in formal political institutions frequently rely on various factors that include wilful blindness, jealousy, selfishness, altruism, prejudice, or powerful moral-political emotions such as patriotism (love of country, kin and kind), *outrage* or injustice. These “non-rational” factors play a critical role in creating and sustaining political momentum in our time.

Given all this, we argue there is value in paying attention to the role of moral emotions in the shaping political action. To understand what is happening in social movements such as *Nuit Debout*, the work of philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and her account of political and moral emotions is also helpful [94,95]. For Nussbaum, emotions are not simply “impulses that have no connection with our thoughts, imaginings and appraisals” [94]. They are “intelligent” emotional responses based on judgement that guide our ethical views about what is “good or bad”. As Nussbaum argues, emotions are responses to our intelligent reasoning and judgements, and as such are connected to our ethico-political judgement [94]. In this way, emotions can be understood to be part of human intelligence and reasoning, as opposed to being an “irrational” side effect getting in the way of “real” politics [96].

With this in mind, we now turn to young people’s political expressions of resistance, their sense of indignation, and hope that reflect complex (and sometimes seemingly contradictory) feelings and positions. In what follows, we consider what counts as politics. We do this by drawing on the

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<sup>26</sup> Most studies of public opinion and legislative processes, for example, assume rational choice theory, while overlooking the contradictions that set liberalism and democracy against each other much of the time. It the kind of contradiction exemplified, in the way the Valls government pushed through its labour legislation without putting the laws to a vote and by using the constitution to justify their use of constitutional-legal rules to preserve the Republic (which is actually the use of sovereign power to declare an exception to the normal rules of law).

participants' own interpretative capacities about what moved them to participate and how they interpret their actions. We ask how did they describe what was happening? Did they see what they did as political, and importantly why they did act as they did? And how did they interpret the actions of others? Such insider accounts are critical if we recognise that human action is not political unless those involved and those observing interpreted the actions as such.

As many young people participating in *Nuit Debout* understood, they were moved to action by political or moral emotions such as *righteous anger* and *disenchantment*, *disappointment*, and *disillusionment* with the French "political class" and political elites. As we show here, a deep sense of *betrayal*, and *anger* at having to bear the brunt of austerity policies fuelled the protestors who turned up day and night to express their disappointment when facing what they considered to be broken promises made by governments over the years and the "political establishment" more generally.

Alongside the *outrage* was *hopeful optimism* and *pride*. When righteous anger combined with *hope* it often generated a sense of *urgency* about the imperative for change and to find new ways of doing democracy and politics. This highlights Simon Critchley's insight that politics can be understood as powerful moral responses to "situational injustice" [97]. It is also similar to what motivated participants in social movements, such as Spain's *Los Indignados* and the Occupy Movement [97,98] (pp. 1–16).

Many of the young people participating in *Nuit Debout* were students (who were also working part-time or full-time to help pay for their studies) were also experiencing the fallout from the Great Recession (2008) which cut French GDP by 3.1%. By May 2013, unemployment had risen in general to 10.4% and was even higher for young workers, while 20% of young people under 18 were deemed to be in poverty [99], circumstances that continued into 2016 [8–12]. Given their precarious status young people are directly affected by the labour reforms of the *El Khomri law*. They are already losing ground and the reforms would further weaken their working conditions and capacity to live a decent life.

Young people involved in *Nuit Debout* describe their experiences of politics and identities variously as citizens with a strong sense of disillusionment and disaffection, who had in effect become outsiders in their own polity. Many reported feeling *betrayed*, *disillusioned*, *angry*, *despondent* and *annoyed*, if not *enraged*. Many *Nuit Debout* participants were fed up and felt denigrated. As 35-year-old Matthiew explained: "The labour law was the final straw". According to Matthiew: "This government [ . . . has failed] to deal with the real problems such as unemployment, climate change and a society heading for disaster" [100]. Twenty-six-year-old Jocelyn reiterated this sense of betrayal, and disillusionment and loss of faith due to the broken promises [101] (pp. 125–140): "People are really sick and tired, and that feeling has been building for years. Everything Hollande once promised . . . but gave up on really gets me down" [100]. Similarly, 27-year old Mariam also felt "deep betrayal". As she explained: "This government is doing the opposite of what we elected it to do" [102].

According to a *Nuit Debout* press release: "*Nuit Debout* is the result of several dynamics: a general but diffuse anger and the development of different specific struggles" [4].<sup>27</sup> In addition, as Marco, a 28-year-old student explained, it was "a sense of disillusionment and indignation" that moved him to action [103].<sup>28</sup>

While *righteous anger* dominated, a sense of *hope* and *empowerment* were also present. They are manifest, for example, in the idea that young people themselves had the capacity to take action outside the stultified conventional political domain. As Marco explained:

"The event itself, [ . . . ] [had the] ability to mark a generation. We could do things, we could go outside, we could organise things ourselves. Above all, [we saw] the politicisation of many young people who had never previously been linked with politics". [103]

<sup>27</sup> "The El Khomri bill on working conditions mobilised so many people because by pushing injustices further and further the dam broke on how much we could take" (Press Release 30 March 2016, reproduced in [4] Farbiaz, 2016, p. 36).

<sup>28</sup> Interview carried out by authors with young *Nuit Debout* participant Marco in July 2018.

He continued explaining how *Nuit Debout* produced a sense of generational solidarity, or what he described as “generational interpellation or questioning”, based on a recognition that many young people “were experiencing the same common problems” [103].

According to Patrick Farbiaz, a former parliamentary assistant to the Green Party (but not a young person himself), reported a strong sense of *fear* existed among younger participants:

“*Nuit Debout* is not a fortuitous ‘clap of thunder’. In the short term, it is the wake-up call for young people who were thought to be terrified and paralysed by the Jihadist terrorist attacks in January and November 2015. **Young people have risen up against the emergency state** and the decision to enact the revocation of nationality [withdrawal of French nationality from French nationals returning to France after taking part in Isis activities abroad], symbols of **governance through fear**. Young people protested against the El Khomri law showing their willingness to fight against a society where **precarity affects young people** as well as their elders. [...] **‘Were not scared’** is the founding expression of the movement” [4].<sup>29</sup>

Some young participants were also moved by a sense of *hope*, by the belief they could in some ways remedy the “broken system” and bring about social change through collective action. As 22-year-old Cécile commented about the assembly of which she was part: “I don’t agree with the state society is in today. To me, politics feels broken. This movement appeals in terms of citizen action. I come here after class and I intend to keep coming back. I hope it lasts” [8].

Remaining faithful to a commitment to a collective identity several *Nuit Debout* participants published testimonies signed as a collective. It is a valuable edition that offers insider accounts of their own experiences and why they became involved [3]. As one contributor to this collective explained, they were *tired* of being thwarted and denied opportunities for a good life:

“We are **fed up** with this world that has had its humanity amputated. These **daily injustices**, these repeated **frustrations**. [...] This life is eating us up from the inside. **Anger** is rumbling in our guts/stomach. If we let it, it will take us over and prevent us from going forward/advancing. Let’s embrace it, use it to rise us up. Standing we will be unstoppable” [3].<sup>30</sup>

Another reported, a feeling of “disgust” with the way “political elites” were conducting themselves and how that had to that point engendered a sense of powerlessness:

“It all started with a feeling, like a dull thud of **powerlessness** that one hears every morning walking by the men and women that the system spits into the gutter. The humming of servitude that echoes the bleakness of the TV news that **vomits** out its absurd stream of devastating news. This sensation of **weariness** and **disgust** that we all feel. Usually we just keep quiet. Too often we say nothing. This was the starting point, the point where everything fused together” [3].<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> “*Nuit Debout n’est pas un coup de tonnerre fortuit. A court terme, c’est le réveil d’une jeunesse qu’on croyait tétanisée par les attentats jihadistes de janvier et de novembre 2015. Une jeunesse qui s’est soulevée contre l’état d’urgence et la déchéance de nationalité, symboles d’une gouvernance par la peur, et qui s’est mobilisée contre la loi El Khomri en affirmant son désir de lutter contre une société où la précarité frappe les jeunes comme leurs aînés.*”

<sup>30</sup> “*Nous ne voulons plus de ce monde amputé de son humanité. Ces injustices quotidiennes, ces frustrations répétées, ces horaires de travail illimités, ces enfants qui survivent dans la rue, ces mort.e.s par milliers qu’on réduit à des chiffres épuisent notre capacité à ressentir. Cette vie nous ravage de l’intérieur. La colère gronde dans nos tripes. Si nous ne l’acceptons pas, elle prendra toute la place, nous empêchera d’avancer. Embrassons-la, utilisons-la pour nous relever. Debout, nous serons inarrêtables.*”

<sup>31</sup> “*Tout part d’un sentiment, du bruit sourd de l’impuissance que l’on entend chaque matin en passant devant ces femmes et ces hommes que le système recrache dans le caniveau. Ce bourdonnement servile qui fait écho à la morosité du journal télévisé vomissant son flot absurde de nouvelles accablantes. Cette sensation qui gave nos esprits de lassitude, de dégoût, nous l’éprouvons tout.e.s. Nous nous taisons, souvent. Trop souvent. Ici se situe le point de départ, le point de fusion.*”

As Nussbaum argues, *disgust* is a negative moral-political emotion often found in political debates, (for example, in debates on race, ethnicity and same sex marriage). As she explains, disgust is often associated with anger and can “involve strong aversion tendencies” directed towards by whom one is disgusted. In the case above, it is the power elite who the narrator is repulsed by and who she “seeks separation from” [104] (pp. 48–49). *Nuit Debout* marks such a separation, a “starting point” from which participants could break away and try to begin something clean and new and fresh, something that is not “contaminated” by what many participants saw as the incestuousness and ineptitude of the traditional political community.

It is a disgust at the failure of politician to do their job, to take seriously their responsibility to ensure all citizens have their most basic rights to shelter and food secured:

“When we are **alarmed** about women, men and children who are locked outside, outdoors and without a roof over their heads that everyone has a right to, they [politicians] reply that the housing crisis will pass, whilst nurturing real estate speculation” [3] (pp. 12–14).<sup>32</sup>

Here we see a *distaste* about the *debasement* of politics as it became “publicity”. It was a development experienced as destructive of optimism and hope:

“The transformation of politics into mere communication anesthetises our hopes” [3] (pp. 18–20).<sup>33</sup>

Again, we see the core idea of disgust evident in the use of metaphors such as “gnawing”, “rotting”, “worms”, all reminders of our own mortality and animal status. As Nussbaum observes, the primary object of this powerful political emotion—disgust—are bodily secretions, decay, that are “oozy, slimy, smelly”. As moral-political emotions and metaphors they work very effectively to communicate the idea that the “corrupt”, unhealthy and noxious polity is like diseased bodily fluids which as such can “contaminate” all that is valued, that can destroy hope for the future, and thus must be avoided [80] (p. 48):

“Since the setting up of the ‘state of emergency’ [enforced after the serious acts of terrorism in 2015] our democracy has been **rotting** like a fruit **gnawed at by worms**. [ . . . ] We are living in a climate of **fear** whose extremes weaken us and affect what is dearest to us—our **dignity**” [3] (p. 12).<sup>34</sup>

To grasp how the participants in *Nuit Debout* understood the political, we drew on the participant’s own interpretations of what had moved them to engage in various kinds of expressive political actions. We considered how they described events, the dynamics at play, and how they interpreted the actions of others including governments and political elites. What we discovered was that many participants identified the role of moral-political emotions to say why they had engaged in the kinds of political solidarity that *Nuit Debout* had made possible. As participants made clear, they experienced a deep sense of *betrayal*, after years of “broken promises by governments” and “the political establishment” more generally. They said they were angry at having to bear the brunt of austerity policies and the prospect of law reforms that would further reduce their capacity to enjoy secure decent work. Some talked about their *disenchantment*, *disappointment*, and *disillusionment* with the French “political class”. These moral emotions were what moved the protestors to turn up every day and night, to debate online and to listen and even to speak and in public spaces.

<sup>32</sup> “Quand nous nous alarmons que des femmes, des hommes et des enfants soient enfermés dehors, hors des murs et du toit auquel chacun.e a droit, ils.elles nous répondent que la crise du logement est passagère, tout en entretenant la spéculation immobilière.”

<sup>33</sup> “La transformation de la politique en communication pure anesthésie nos espoirs.”

<sup>34</sup> “Depuis l’instauration de l’état d’urgence, nous voyons notre démocratie pourrir comme un fruit rongé par les vers.”

This reminds us that speaking and acting politically are powerfully embodied practices and experiences. This insight can go missing when political science accounts of the political accounts are framed in terms of “individual” rational action or as the effect of structural “factors” that are woven into causal predictive-explanatory narratives. Identifying the role of political emotions highlights the diverse and complex ways politics is practiced, how it is value laden, and always marked by deeply felt ethical and moral sentiment. In terms prefigured by Arendt’s [67] (pp. 255–259) account of human action as *praxis*, we see better how social movements along with more formal political institutions and practices characterised by unplannability, contingency, and human vulnerability even fragility because of the way what she calls “principles” which include important moral-political emotions impel us to act. This suggests that political action is often informed by ideas, feelings and actions that do not look all that rational or predictable.

## 6. Conclusions

This article outlined how the *Nuit Debout* movement started in March 2016 and how it began in opposition to neoliberal industrial legislation favouring business, which removed various protections from workers that would have a particularly adverse effect on many young people. *Nuit Debout* started in Paris with a small group of around fifty participants who set up temporary camps each day which were removed every night by the police under the direction of the Socialist Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo. This meant every night the community spirit was broken as the make-shift stalls and shelters had to be taken down and rebuilt every morning. While for some this adverse action by the state may have enhanced a sense of solidarity, it was also wearing and disheartening. This experienced alongside other repressive responses from the state, no doubt having to set-up and dismantle equipment each day, played a part in the decline of *Nuit Debout*, as well as the passing of the labour law.

As we argued, political or moral emotions like righteous anger, a sense of injustice and betrayal, solidarity or camaraderie, and love of one’s country help in understanding what moved so many people to become part of *Nuit Debout*. As participants themselves said, political or moral emotions rooted variously in hope, and even in feelings of love as well as feeling betrayal or anger helped them develop a sense of solidarity and a commitment to a more participatory political practice directed at overturning what many considered to be unfair and discriminatory industrial “reforms”.

While *Nuit Debout* was initiated by a leftist coalition, it soon grew to encompass a more diverse movement, heavily comprised of young people. Within a short time, *Nuit Debout* spread to many towns such as Bordeaux, Lille, Montpellier, Nantes, Rennes, Strasbourg and Toulouse, and grew to include thousands of participants across France. At the same time, *Nuit Debout’s* initial political agenda expanded from opposition to the new labour legislation to include a range of issues from the austerity policies, to housing affordability and social inequality forming a “union” or “meeting of struggles” (*Convergence des Luttes*). Young people also provided the momentum for much of the online and offline recruitment and mobilisation methods used in *Nuit Debout* much of which was new to France [24] (p. 6).<sup>35</sup>

*Nuit Debout* was part of a larger process of global discontent evident in the occupation of public squares such as the Occupy Movement that began in the United States, the *Indignados* and *15-M* similar anti-austerity movement in Spain and Greece. Yanis Varoufakis (the former Greek Minister of Finance and founder of DiEM25) participated in *Nuit Debout* and spoke at Place de la République pointing to the commonalities between *Nuit Debout* and the Syntagma Square movement in Athens, in 2011 [105].<sup>36</sup> A declaration made during *Nuit Debout* also confirmed this view:

<sup>35</sup> “Nous avons assisté à un mouvement exceptionnel, inattendu, dans une conjoncture où l’émergence d’une action politique semblait tellement improbable, un mouvement remarquable par sa durée, par la diversité de ses formes et par ses innovations.”

<sup>36</sup> During *Nuit Debout* a “revolutionary” or “republican” calendar was used that harks back to the new calendar established after the French Revolution. In this way, *Nuit Debout* started on 31 March 2016, the next day was 32 March and the day after 33 March, etc.

“This movement was not born and will not die in Paris. From the Arab Spring to the 15-M movement, from Tahir Square to Gezi Park, Republic Square in Paris and the numerous other occupied public places this evening in France is the illustration of the same angers, the same hopes and the same conviction: the need for a new society where democracy, dignity and freedom are not empty declarations” [4] (pp. 41–42).<sup>37</sup>

Young participants in *Nuit Debout* were inspired by “anti-austerity” movements and expressions of solidarity that had taken place elsewhere recognising themselves as part of an on-going global phenomenon:

“Around us, uprisings are thriving. Everywhere, people are rising up one after another: the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, 15-M in Spain, Occupy Wall Street in the United States, the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong ... Movements and public squares are feeding our imagination” [3] (p. 25).<sup>38</sup>

As the testimonies of young participants in *Nuit Debout* reveal, they were reflexively aware political activists who acted out an interest in doing politics differently, and who took the principles of democratic inclusion seriously. They were interested in standing up to “the political elite” with whom they had become disillusioned, in part due to austerity policies. Their actions were not those of a selfish “generation” preoccupied with a “sense of self-entitlement”.

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<sup>37</sup> “Ce mouvement n’est pas né et ne mourra pas à Paris. Du Printemps arabe au mouvement du 15-M, de la place Tahir au parc de Gezi, la place de la République et les nombreux autres lieux occupés ce soir en France sont l’illustration des mêmes colères, des mêmes espoirs et de la même conviction: la nécessité d’une société nouvelle, où la démocratie, dignité et liberté ne sont pas des déclarations vides.”

<sup>38</sup> “Autour de nous, les révoltes fleurissent. Partout, les peuples se soulèvent les uns après les autres: printemps arabes en Tunisie et en Egypte, Gezi en Turquie, 15-M en Espagne, Occupy Wall Street aux États-Unis, révolution des parapluies à Hong Kong. Les mouvements des places ont nourri notre imaginaire.”

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