



## Pushed to the margins of the city: The urban night as a timespace of protest at Nuit Debout, Paris<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Geographers studying protest movements have brought attention to the social and spatial contexts in which political action is constituted. As the legal right to protest has become more and more restricted in many Western, activists have had to seek new times and spaces for protest, with protest camps having risen alongside the anti-austerity movement since 2011. The ongoing Nuit Debout protests in Paris have turned explicitly to night, drawing on experience of previous protests to colonise this timespace on a recurring basis, laying to claim to the night as a moment for protest. This paper therefore uses the case of Nuit Debout to consider more widely how night shapes (urban) protest movements. I argue that the move to the night might be seen as an attempt to find a timespace in which a more open and creative politics is possible, strategically responding to the reduction in the freedom to protest in the more heavily surveyed day. I explore how the specific characteristics of night have both facilitated innovation at Nuit Debout and other sites, but also the restrictions that night has brought. More broadly, this helps us understand the changing dynamics of urban spaces and rhythms as night-time activity intensifies.

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“Revolution sometimes happens because everyone refuses to go home” (Butler, 2015 p.98 p.98)

On March 31st 2016, 390,000 people gathered in Paris's Place de la République to protest against the 'Loi Travail', a set of proposed changes to France's 'Labour Code', which consists of the laws and practices that provide French workers with significantly more rights than those in many other European countries, including the symbolically significant 35 h limit to the working week. The protests began as many others do during the day, and continued through the afternoon. As night fell, however, the protestors did not go home. Speeches and debates continued, giving way as night progressed to more relaxed discussions, drinking, partying and eventually sleeping. When morning came the majority left, with a small number of protestors remaining to maintain the temporary structures that had been built in la République. The next night, at 6pm on what the protestors called 'Mars 32<sup>em</sup>' ("March 32nd"), many returned, to spend another night debating, discussing and protesting. The protestors hadn't gone home; the Nuit Debout

movement was born. Following this, Nuit Debout took on a new form of nightly recurring protests, with events beginning in the late afternoon and continuing until roughly midnight. Further protests spread to other French cities, notably Grenoble and Lyon, as well as to other cities in Europe and the Francophone world, though outside of France with much less impact. The protests persisted with regularity until the summer of 2016, before transforming into a more infrequent series of events, coordinated around an online presence. Nuit Debout, translating roughly as 'through the night' but perhaps more evocatively as 'all night long', is a movement inspired by the protest camps of Indignados in Spain and Occupy in the Anglophone world, and alongside these it forms part of a group of activist and political movements across the world that have emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring and anti-austerity protests (Feigenbaum, Frenzel, & McCurdy, 2013). While Nuit Debout is the first of these protests to make its nocturnality explicit, all these protests are linked by the new ways in which they have continued into the night. In so doing, then night and specifically the urban night emerges as a newly contested time-space for social movements. As such, it offers both opportunities for these movements, and presents new challenges.

In this paper, I want to add to the literature which has begun to explore the embodied experiences of these movements (Bolton, Froese, & Jeffrey, 2016; Halvorsen, 2015; Juris, 2012) by looking at

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the role that the night has played for *Nuit Debout*, and other similar protest movements. In the same way that geographers have studied the role of place in producing spaces of protest (Massey, 1995), this paper engages with *night* as both a resource and a barrier for action, which shapes the nature of protest activity but which also may itself be shaped the presence of protestors. In so doing, my argument is that as night is a timespace at the edge of the contemporary city, protestors in these movements have been able to make claims over it in ways that they are no longer able to in the increasingly restricted and controlled day. This has facilitated the production of new time-spaces for democratic debate and participation, facilitating the sort of creativity of protest that the post-2011 movements have sought, with greater or lesser success. This article begins with an exploration of the history of night and protest movements, exploring how recent protest movements differ in their use of night from those that had gone before. I will also explore how night sits at the edge of contemporary urbanism, and expand upon my description of it as an edgework. Through participant observation, photography and a small number of interviews at *Nuit Debout* in May 2016, I then document the ways in which night has been used as a resource by protestors. I focus on three key themes: disruption; conviviality and cover; presence and visibility. In this research, *Nuit Debout* acts as an interesting case study, with its repeating nocturnal activities standing as a roughly 6-month experimentation in a particular form of urban protest movement. I argue that this allows us to explore more broadly how contemporary protests are finding power in pushing at the edge of what it means to inhabit the city, in order to carve out spaces in public discourse.

### 1. The urban night, protest camps and not going home

Geographers studying protest and activism have sought to show how the places and spaces of protest shape the emergent political activity. In a seminal paper, Massey argues that “spatiality can be a key moment in the constitution of political subjectivities and collectivities” (1995p.285). She argues that by bringing a focus on spatiality, geographers can ground understandings of emergent socio-political identities through their empirical contexts and histories. The specific places in which activist and protest movements form and the ways that they transform and are transformed by these places are therefore central to the ways both in which they contest power, and in which the protestors construct their own identities. In their writing on ‘autonomous geographies’, Chatterton and Pickerill identify protest spaces as “those spaces where there is a questioning of the laws and social norms of society and a creative desire to constitute non-capitalist, collective forms of politics, identity, and citizenship (2006p.730).” Perhaps unsurprisingly, geographers have been particularly attracted to study of protests about the nature of access to specific places or to public space more generally, as seen in the focus on various ‘Right to the City’ movements (Mitchell, 2003) or contestations over key urban sites as part of regeneration, redevelopment or gentrification processes (Smith, 2002; Uysal, 2012). A point I want to develop here is the claim that the production of protest spaces requires a “spatio-temporal strategy” (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006p.735). While such strategies may be located narrowly in a specific place, they are always connected with broader networks, and the very act of using strategies to produce protest spaces that imagine possible futures is a cosmopolitan one, oriented towards futures and towards other places. In this paper, by bringing out the role of *night* in protest spaces, I look to focus a little more on the intersection of the spatial and the temporal that Pickerill and Chatterton’s wording implies, producing a fuller picture of the strategies involved in creating protest spaces.

Historically, night has been seen as a politically dangerous timespace. Prior to the spread of public artificial lighting, the state typically viewed nocturnal activity with suspicion. Curfews were common, and the church and state engaged in a direct form of what Foucault calls ‘sovereign power’ (Foucault, 1982), with harsh physical punishments applied to those who attempted to evade the night-watch (Beaumont, 2015). Gradually through the nineteenth century, such an approach to governing the night became impractical. As a variety of accounts by historians have explored (Baldwin, 2012; Schivelbusch, 1988; Schlör, 1998), new forms of leisure, work and capital emerged in the night-time city alongside the development of technologies of artificial lighting and heating. From incessant factories to night-time entertainment, lit and active parts of the city were gradually turned over to the public. Such processes increased through the twenty-first century and beyond (Crary, 2013; Gwiazdzinski, 2005; Melbin, 1987), such that some writers now speak of an era of ‘24/7’. The night, it is argued, has become safer, tamer and better-understood, though later work – such as that of Gwiazdzinski and Crary – has been subtle in its analysis, showing intersecting temporalities. Indeed, social science work has increasingly shown the variety of ways in which night is used in the contemporary city (Edensor, 2015). Despite becoming more integrated into the city, however, night remains a timespace at the border of urban life. As activity expands in certain ways, nonetheless many of the characteristics of urban life that we would take for granted in the day have gone – services do not run, our networks of friends and acquaintances are not accessible, transport becomes more difficult, and so forth. On a global scale, night is becoming less distinct from day, being significantly incorporated into the same socio-economic systems as daytime: this might be described as part of the spatio-temporal expansion of capital (Castree, 2009). However, night remains a time outside of normal rhythms, and a time in which many people are uncomfortable using public space. Night, as such, has not disappeared, but has fragmented with activity and ‘day’ appearing in certain places, but quiet and darkness remaining in many.

It’s worth pointing out here that the object we describe at night is itself varied, contested and multiple. Analytically, we can identify two core components of night. The first of these can be (somewhat clumsily) called the ‘biogeoastronomical’ night, that is, the intersection of biology, geography and astronomy. From this, we get the latitude-differentiated seasonal and circadian rhythms of light and dark but also the association of these with sleep or rest. Crucially, this element of night brings with it, to a greater or lesser extent, darkness and artificial illumination, which shape our relationships with place (Edensor, 2013, 2015). The interplay of darkness and artificial illumination creates a thicker, more complex urban landscape in which shadows grow and move, some spaces become hidden but moments of city are foregrounded. We lose our capacity to differentiate between things (Edensor, 2015; Morris, 2011); we lose even the certainty of the boundary around own bodies (Shaw, 2015). In understanding night, we must thus understand a timespace in which we are more open, more uncertain, more tentative and perhaps more vulnerable. Second, the ‘sociorhythmic’ night refers to the closure or reduction in multiple different services, practices, infrastructures and activities. Here, night is created not by one or two practices going into ‘night-mode’ – we can easily imagine spaces (e.g. nightclubs) which are busier at night than day – but by the intersection of multiple rhythms, the ‘polyphony’ to borrow Lefebvre’s phrasing (2004), which together produce a timespace of reduced activity in most spaces, even in large built-up areas and even in spaces which might not be experiencing the darkness of the biogeoastronomical night. In other words, recognising the presence of a ‘socio-rhythmic’ night helps us identify that features of ‘the night’, such as reduced public services, increased

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