

Nuit Debout, Observations and Evidence: A Response

An anonymous response to the blog post '*Nuit Debout: Middle Class Protests in Neoliberal France*'



Let us make things clear from the start. I am not involved in the *Nuit Debout* movement. My friends are not involved in this movement. I am from a working class background and I am always glad when social research points at the contradiction between the progressive ideals of the middle class and the exclusionary practices they enact on a daily basis. I am seriously annoyed when my middle class friends or acquaintances position themselves as egalitarian progressives while benefitting from multisided advantages in their everyday life.

After having read your blog post, however, I found it hugely problematic. This is my response.

Let's start with a positive point. It is well-known that movements which claim to defend egalitarian principles fail to enact them through their everyday workings. Here your observations are widely corroborated by the extant literature. However, it might have been useful to note that the role of class and gender in structuring the inner workings of progressive social movements is not unique to *Nuit Debout*.

Let's get serious. *Nuit Debout* is a national movement. While it did start in *Place de la République*, it spread in a number of towns across France and has been lasting for a number of weeks now. In contrast, your claims are based on a few hours that you spent in one place. *Ergo*, even if your observations were to capture what is actually happening in *Place de la République*, you are not in a position to make relevant inferences about *Nuit Debout* at large. The empirical substance on which you ground your grand claims about the social makeup and the workings of the movement are slim, to say the least.

You observed that two men with a regional accent and who were drinking beer did not adhere to the movement after discussing with some of the activists. You then suggest that these discussions might have instilled into them the sense that they did not "belong" in the movement. Then, jumping to conclusions, you suggest that these two scenes evidence the existence of "exclusionary practices" within *Nuit Debout*. This is not to say that such practices do not exist. However, perhaps a good idea might have been, instead of making assumptions, to actually ask these two men whether these discussions had made them feel excluded. Sociology is not about assigning meanings to the conduct of agents on the basis of pure speculation, and a trivial but good rule of practice is "don't make up what you could find out" (Becker 1997). Let me put it this way. I myself

have a regional accent. I also enjoy drinking beer. I do not think, however, that these are sufficient elements for you to make inferences about the rationale behind my behaviour, without even talking to me. This is both scientifically and ethically wrong.

There is more. Among all the relevant attributes that you might have used to characterize and depict these guys, why the hell would you choose to focus on their accent and the fact that they were drinking beer? What are these traits supposed to tell us about the scenes and the people you describe? What are your assumptions here? Make it plain: what exactly are the meanings you associate with having a regional accent and drinking beer? Are you suggesting that these men must be working class because they have a regional accent and happened to drink beer when you saw them? I might be slightly paranoid here, but I cannot help to think that perhaps this focus on accents and beer tells us more about the more or less consciously classed perceptual frame with which you decipher the social world, than about the scenes you witness and the people you describe.

Let us get at **the most important part**. You mention the *ongoing* sociological inquiry about *Nuit Debout*. You even provide an article which summarizes the *preliminary* findings of a **survey conducted with 328 respondents** in *Place de la République*. However, you fail to report the multifarious aspects of these findings which unambiguously invalidate your claims about the social makeup of *Nuit Debout*. Indeed, while you claim that this is a middle class movement, **no less than 20% of the survey respondents were unemployed** and 16% of the respondents who did have a job were workers. This proportion, the researchers note in the article you quote, is superior to the proportion of workers in living in Paris, and comparable to proportion of workers in Ile de France. All this shows the shallowness of your claims, based on a few hours of “observation”, that *Nuit Debout* is a middle class movement.

There is more. You claim that the survey established that the movement is “student-dominated”, yet the findings of this ongoing study contain no claim about the proportion of students among the research participants. As for the fact that you chose not to report these findings that would not fit your narrative, it is at best a mistake; at worse, it is downright intellectual dishonesty and manipulation of the readers who cannot read French. This really pissed me off, because what is the point in having trained sociologists taking the trouble to conducting a proper, rigorous sociological inquiry if, in the process of disseminating the findings to an audience who cannot access them, you just lie or make up stuff?

Unlike what you suggest, *bobo* is a word that does exist in English. People even write bad books about them (Brooks 2000). However, issues of translation and context are important. English readers of this blog might not know what the connotations attached to and the social usages of the word *bobo* are in France. In particular, it might have been relevant to point at the fact that it has become, over the last ten years or so, a key weapon in the lexical armoury of the **National Front** (You might have explained that in the political field, *bobo* is a vague, inconsistent umbrella term bandied about to cast discredit on whoever expresses progressive views. For instance, you might have reported how in some newspapers, a few months ago, marriage equality was elevated into a “*bobo caprice*”).

The categories that we use to divide up the world and represent it to ourselves are important. Words matter and social labels are weapons in political and classificatory struggles. The word *bobo* is no exception. It is embedded in an obnoxious, reactionary network of significations. Specifically, it is a crucial component in the discursive strategies that right-wing political parties use to seduce the *classes populaires*. It is a smokescreen. Nicolas Sarkozy and Marine Le Pen love to bowl about the *bobos*. Why so? Precisely because both are caricatures of bourgeois. Both are extremely wealthy and closely connected to the wealth elite. Sarkozy is notorious for being a personal friend of the wealthiest capitalists you can find in France; and the names of people gravitating around the upper echelons of the National Front **were found in the Panama Papers**. In using the word *bobo*, however, these politicians, these incarnations of the capitalist bourgeoisie, craft their presentational self. They pretend to break away with the bourgeoisie. They pretend that the bourgeoisie is elsewhere. The term *bobo* has been key in strategies aiming at doing just this:

concealing how these bourgeois politicians and their political structures are compromised with the wealthiest economic strata of French society.

Sadly enough, these discursive strategies, coupled with the neoliberal turn implemented by the *Socialist Party* (Eribon 2008), seem to have proved quite effective. The denunciation of the *bobo* has supplanted the denunciation of the capitalist, and a substantial fraction of the *classes populaires* now votes for the *Républicains* or the National Front. I understand that, in bringing up this disparaging label, you were willing to denunciate the contradiction between the progressive commitment of some middle class jerks and their daily practices of exclusion and privilege. I have no doubt that there are middle class jerks at *Nuit Debout*. Middle class jerks are everywhere. There is no political nor analytical gain, however, in appropriating and spreading the ideological lexicon of the right. At best, one might argue that the rise of *bobo* as a discursive weapon illustrates the intensifications of struggles between different fractions of the bourgeoisie. However, even framed in this way, this disparaging term is not more attractive. I would rather side with progressive bobos, deluded as they might be about themselves, than with the most conservative fraction of the bourgeoisie.

I cannot help to note, by way of conclusion, that your overall argument, perhaps *inadvertently*, maps onto the (undergrounded) claims right-wing newspapers have been making about the movement since it started. Amusingly enough, you fail to explain that it is in no small part to undo these controversial attacks that the team of sociologists you mention started a research in the first place.

Peace.

References

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