

Nuit Debout: Middle Class Protests in Neoliberal France

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Photo from www.lavoixdunord.fr

Since March, France has known a wave of opposition against a labour law reform. The reform plans to further deregulate labour and decentralize bargaining, among other things; it will dispose of decades of social gains. 74% of French people oppose it. It has brought more than a million people on the street for the last 2 months, and led to heated confrontations between the police and participants. Public squares have been occupied under the name *Nuit Debout* (meaning “standing up night” or “awoken night”). The movement started in Paris, and gained other major cities after 10 days. As I was staying in France in April to conduct research in Lille, where I come from, I took interest in the movement, and decided to spend a couple of nights at *Nuit Debout*.

On my second night, upon my arrival at the *Place de la République*, I went around the group, watching the organizers drawing a map of the square with indications of different working groups soon to be formed. I watched a man standing up from a bench on the square, where he was sitting and drinking beer with two of his friends; he came and asked the organizers, in a regional accent, what the movement was about and what they were doing. As soon as he got an answer, he went back to the bench with his friends. I wondered what made him go away. Maybe it was a lack of interest; or maybe that he did not belong there. The night before, I had watched another guy, also with a beer in hand and a regional accent, slowly drawing apart from the group as the assembly went on. These instances were not unique; when I researched the movement on social media and found feedback on the movement in varied cities, I realised I was not the only one noticing the exclusionary dynamics of the group.

The movement was described by its organizers as a “people’s movement” (*mouvement populaire*, an adjective that has been used recently to describe the working class). However, what I witnessed on that night has little to do with a “people’s movement”. The crowd was male- and student-dominated, which a [study](#) on the Parisian *Nuit Debout* seems to confirm. However, there seemed to be an obsession to say that they represented all the angry, beaten down people of France.

These dynamics were also very lively in the distribution of speech during the meetings. On my second night at *Nuit Debout*, I chose to participate in a working group. Out of a panel of groups focused on logistics, communication, or themes such as feminism and environment, I chose to take part in a group discussing the constitution.

The aim was to read the constitution, commenting what issues we took with it. The discussion seemed to be dominated by three people; three men discussing how the articles were problematic, about the historical roots of the constitution, on how they did not make sense from a legal aspect, with very factual details. It all happened at a very fast pace, as the discussion leaders agreed we had a “lot of work” to do. This made it hard to follow.

Facing these hyperactive participants, others were left out. As the discussion went on, my 15 year old brother, who accompanied me on the second night, leaned towards me and made a point on something someone had said. I encouraged him to say it to the group out loud, knowing he usually enjoys speaking publicly. He refused. After a while, I turned to a guy sitting right next to me. He seemed shy. He did not have the fancy clothing some in the group had. When he saw I was looking at him, he nodded, showing his approval to the discussion. He mumbled something I did not understand. A few minutes later, as the meeting was disturbed by the appearance of the city’s Mayor in the arts museum next-door, he left. It is also worth noticing only one woman intervened during the 45 minutes conversation; also, few people of colour were at the meeting on the nights I went.



Photo from wiki.nuitdebout.fr

As Bourdieu theorized, on the linguistic market, not everyone is equal: “*every linguistic situation functions as a market on which the speaker places his products, and the product he produces for this market depends on his anticipation of the price his products will receive*” (1993, p.62). Every speaker learns to appreciate how legitimate their own sayings are on the linguistic market, in accordance with their own habitus and the linguistic situation they involved in. The way people participated in discourse (or did not) during the meetings was an illustration of the way the movement reproduced the segregation they were pretending to fight against. Class, gender, and level of knowledge about politics seemed to be strong determinants on whether people chose to participate in the meeting and in discussions.

While *Nuit Debout* participants prided themselves in being “a people’s movement”, this did not correspond to what I watched; they were a middle class movement, at best.

Talking to my father about the movement, he showed only disdain for what he called “*bobos*”, a French term describing lefty middle class people who have a sensitivity to issues of poverty and climate change. More or less, what my father meant was that they are hypocrites, claiming they are defending the interests of a whole population, while reproducing exclusionary behaviour.

Nuit Debout has been described by the participants as vibrant and inspiring a feeling of togetherness. However, this is not what I have watched. I witnessed how being male and middle class gave legitimacy and space within discussions. I watched how the people who felt they did not have the competence to attend silenced themselves or left the movement. I watched “the

power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.4). I did not have any desire to go back to *Nuit Debout* after these two nights; apparently, many people felt the same way: my brother told me only 30 people were occupying the square the last time he went by, around a month after our first visit, when around 200 people were gathered on the *Place de la République*.

References:

- Bourdieu, P. (1984), *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul
 - Bourdieu, P. (1978), “The linguistic market” in *Question of sociology*(1993), SAGE Publications
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