



# **Bibliodebout: a collaborative library in a social movement**

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**Title:**

**Bibliodebout: a collaborative library in a social movement**

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*An unexpected political mobilisation leads to the occupation of a large number of public squares in French cities from the end of March to July 2016. In those Nuits Debout, a collective starts up BiblioDebout, a participative library working on a gift basis. Through participative observations and text analysis of the collective's mailing lists, this paper studies how BiblioDebout expresses a specific relationship between knowledge and power, and, therefore, emancipation. BiblioDebout is utopian, egalitarian, emotional and experimental, and so on could be an inspiration for public libraries willing to renew with their political vocation.*

**Keywords:**

Participative library, Political action, Mobilisation, Commons, Democracy, Social movement, Public Libraries

**Paper:**

Several institutions, like Eurostat (Eurostat, 2016) or INSEE (INSEE, 2010) in France, have established that participation in the political life is a criterion of quality of life. This participation is based on the citizen's capacity for action and on their recognition as stakeholders involved in the democratic process. Their electoral weight can help to their recognition, but in France today, more than the electoral process, the participatory process is considered in better place to empower people and to make them take part in the governance and decision processes.

This citizen capacity for political action was, in France, the subject of a contestation movement named Nuit Debout. From the end of March to July 2016, some public squares were occupied, becoming the theatre of debates on various subjects (from work conditions to ecological questions, as well as education, security, constitution...). If this movement begun in reaction to the Work Law, proposed by the socialist minister El Khomri, it was created with the willingness to retrieve a democratic ideal of debate and public space, drawing a communal desire to work together for a better life in society.

This movement gave birth to a participative library, Bibliodebout, especially active in Paris, Lyon and Toulouse. This paper studies this space of documentation and information, which spontaneously came along with a mobilization centered on the capacity for action and the participation in building democracy. If the quality of life depends on our capacity for action, we ought to ask which resources participate in its development, and question the role of knowledge in an empowerment project.

French libraries were built on an emancipation project, which was based on the knowledge democratisation. Currently, this principle, that admits an inequality between the emancipator

(the librarian) and the emancipated, is going to be transformed. In this paper, we aim to verify if BiblioDebout is a fulfilment for another practice of emancipation. This way to think and practice emancipation could be a bit utopian, more egalitarian, maybe emotional, but also experimental.

To verify those hypotheses, we conducted participative observations in the BiblioDebout of Lyon. Following the hashtag #BiblioDebout on Twitter and the BiblioDebout's mailing lists, we observed the exchanges between members, their questions and doubts throughout the movement. We accumulated data on organizers, participants, visitors of the library, their interactions, the building of the content and the discussions about it.

## **Literature review**

For the political philosophy, the relation between knowledge and power is often thought as dependent on each other. For Aristote, the "*skholè*" (spared time for study, which gives the French term "*école*" (school)) is the condition to political actions (Aristote, 1996). Only the elites, who have time to study, could act in politics, as they possess the knowledge to make thoughtful decisions. On a more contemporary point of view, for Foucault the genealogical and archeological study of our society allow us to understand the "dispositifs" working inside to not be just dominated by them, but to be able to change them and to go against them (Foucault, 1976).

Even if this dependent relation is pretty clear, there are some controversial about the actual possibility to transform this dependence in a real action. For Platon, it is by the sacrifice of serenity and contemplation that the one who have seen the ideas will accept to free the others and, eventually, to become a philosopher king (Platon, 2008). On a different point of view, contemporary criticisms of the relations between knowledge and power are studying essentially the power limits. In this way, Habermas (Habermas, 1987) said that the power is, before anything else, in the transmission of ideas and arguments in acknowledged public spheres. For Bourdieu to know and to identify what is dominating us is not enough to act; knowing does not set free and does not offer power. Lastly, for the Spanish philosopher Daniel Innerarity, in a knowledge society as the one in which we live in this 21th century, it is impossible to say that knowledge is helping to take a decision and we have to admit that ignorance and forgetting are also conditions of the political action (Innerarity, 2015).

If these criticisms offer to question the conditional relation between knowledge and politics, they have the default to be more interested by the power than by the knowledge. On the other hand, two authors bring a glance at the power and the knowledge in a conditional and transformed way. For John Dewey, to act inside the society, it is necessary to possess knowledge, which we can build only collectively, in the individual appropriation thought process, already turned toward action and relative to participation (Dewey, 2009). In other words, it is by participation that we develop the knowledge and the power of action. The experimental dimension of Dewey allows to link in a double condition the two terms.

In France, Jacques Rancière suggests another approach in which the emancipator is as much knowledgeable as the emancipated. Thus, the emancipator offers to the emancipated development conditions for his emancipation, more than knowledge itself (Rancière, 2010). In this way, knowledge and its acquisition are already an act of emancipation and a political action. The notions of equality and liberty are summoned as an articulation between knowledge and power for these two authors.

## Methodology

In this article, we will observe the relation between knowledge and power, between equality and inequality, between freedom and domination, through a participative library organized within a political mobilisation.

In order to verify our hypotheses, we conducted first participative observations. We took actively part seventeen times in BiblioDebout Lyon, with others *bibliodeboutistes*<sup>1</sup>. Our observations were made in Lyon, in a BiblioDebout group made on the Paris model. In Lyon, the BiblioDebout was created 14 April 2016 at the Guichard square, became wandering 1 June and finally stopped 22 October 2016. Eleven of our observations were between its creation and the mobility period, six were during its wandering period. This group held a long time, in a particular way, because when the square of Nuit Debout Lyon was evacuated, the BiblioDebout became nomadic and moved itself in different places and events in Lyon and its suburban areas. It was not possible for us to come at all the operations and to observe every day, from the opening to the closing of BiblioDebout (BD). That is why our data are more qualitatives than quantitatives.

Moreover, we followed the national mailing list of BiblioDebout and the mailing list of BiblioDebout Lyon. In this one, there were few exchanges, which were mostly organizational, for example to confirm the dates or to mobilize people. Sometimes, a report was made to relate the last operation. The national list was more used to organize the Paris' library, to tell relate every night's interactions, but also to debates on a national plan on some difficulties points (selection of books, problem with people, etc.). We have begun to follow this list 21 April 2016 ; today, in December 2016, some messages are still sent. We wrote three messages on this list: once individually (Raphaëlle Bats) to take part in one of the conversations about the documents, one to communicate about the dates of BiblioDebout Lyon (Marilou Pain) and once as a binomial to inform the participants of this article. We studied qualitatively the text of the two mailing lists by going through the 381 messages.

Finally, the BiblioDebout's website<sup>2</sup> was another source of information about the events.

## Results & Discussion

It is important to remember that our results are not quantitative, but qualitative. The sources coming from the observation will be noted (BD Lyon, date) and the sources coming from the study of the mailing lists will be noted (Mailing List, Paris or Lyon, date).

### 1/ The time and the space

We observed three phases of the BiblioDebout.

Firstly, we observed a construction and installation phase with many exchanges on the creation of the collection, the interactions, etc. this phase lasted from the end of March to the end of April to Paris, and to the end of May to Lyon. During this phase, the BD establishes itself in the square and tries to build its nest: tarpaulins, cartons, bags, duvets, carpets, pallets. Sometimes, near a bench, sometimes the place is taken by another group<sup>3</sup>, sometimes the

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term "*Bibliodeboutiste*" or "*Debouthécaire*" to design a person who took part to BiblioDebout by offering his/her help during the operations or helping to organise these ones. It is about persons putting efforts in the organisation of the BiblioDebout action.

<sup>2</sup> <http://biblio-debout.org/>

<sup>3</sup> By the group « Falafel debout »...

BiblioDebout is near the subway station, sometimes it is near another commission, Infokiosque (in Lyon) or Poésie Debout (in Paris), etc. We can see that, during this phase, questions about the visibility of the BD, especially about its accessibility to be used and its independence more or less extensible regarding the other commissions.

In Lyon, the first installation was near a little free library installed on the square since several months. This little free library was organized by the neighborhood committee and with the agreement and funding of the town council. An unpleasant exchange between the little free library committee and the BD has shown that the participative libraries can come one after the other without being alike. The first one is not engaged and came without mediation (the little free library is left to the use of people who pass without "librarian"), when the second one (BD) thinks itself in a mobilisation and the Bibliodeboutistes embody this mobilisation by the knowledge.

Afterwards, the first phase has been followed by a struggle phase, especially in Paris, from the end of April to the end of June, where the reports are focused on the interactions with forces of law and order. In general, it is a nomadic phase, clearly affirmed in Lyon, where the BD follows an itinerant Nuit Debout which does not occupy only one square anymore. It is less affirmed in Paris, as the BD is described in the reports as moving, but more like the movement of *bibliodeboutistes* in the manifestations or simply struggling to get to the square. The BD is not anymore installed and occupying, it is nomadic and moving.

Finally, the BD finishes itself in a third phase in which the exchanges are mostly concentrate on the future of BiblioDebout: what could we do with BiblioDebout after Nuit Debout? During this last phase, the BD thought itself in other places than those of the original protest. In result of the protest itinerance observed in the previous phase, this phase is the one of the relation with other protests, other mobilisations. In Lyon, we followed the events around Commons or free softwares or around the TAFTA-CETA<sup>4</sup> (BD Lyon, September to October 2016). In Paris, a link was made with The ZAD of Notre Dame des Landes<sup>5</sup> (Mailing List, Paris, September 2016).

This repartition in three phases shows that BD is neither soluble in Nuit Debout, neither impermeable to Nuit Debout. It exists in a continual exchange with its environment, which is a real difference with libraries, always claiming their neutrality (R. Bats, 2016).

This engagement, in the time and in the space, both conceptual and physical, is a key node to understand what BD mobilizes. Moreover, the BD is thought in a long time, in contradiction with the current societal evolutions rather linked to the immediacy. This is certainly because the BD does not seek to save the actual democracy or the liberties we have, but more to build democracy from a perspective that does not refuse utopia. *"[The Utopist] prefers to engage in the sketch of new cards of the possible, to experiment life possibilities, to decodify the plots of the social order to recompose its territories and to redefine the organiser words of the consensual discourses. Our first conviction is that utopia is a question of an irreducibly political experiment."* (Archipel des devenirs, sd). In this way, BD is placed in the field of experimentation, in which knowledge and power are strongly intertwined.

## 2/ The actors

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<sup>4</sup> These two treaties gave birth to meetings and mobilisations in the 2016's fall in France.

<sup>5</sup> Zone à Défendre : Notre Dame des Landes : mobilisation against an airport construction on a swamp near Nantes.

The donors are either passers-by who deposited one or more document/s, or institutions (publishers, association, public institution, especially libraries). The passers-by, anonymous, bring books of their own library or deposit documentation related to their engagement. In this way, a man of about forty years, a trade unionist, puts down brochures on the history of trade unions and social security (BD Lyon, May 2016). Publishers made spontaneous donations or were contacted by BD members. If the most part of the collectives making donations are known by their engagement (BSF<sup>6</sup>, la Petite Rockette, etc.), others are not considered inherently committed.

In this way, an academic institution will give a stock following the liquidation of a student association (Mailing List, Paris, April 2016), a TV will give digital files of one of its programs (Mailing List, Paris, April 2016), a school publisher will give several boxes of textbooks (Mailing List, Paris, April 2016). We can wonder whether these gifts are a reflection of a commitment of the institution in question, or rather, through these institutions, the manifestation of individual approaches, people who recognise themselves in the BD and in the movement. This is particularly the case for the donation of documents from a TV, for which it is specified that it is an informal donation (Mailing List, Paris, April 2016).

The visitors are also anonymous, taking part or not in the Nuit Debout: curious people passing through, regulars people more or less active in the movement, non-conformists persons finding in the mobilisation a little community, etc. This leads to quite different interactions depending on the level of engagement in the mobilisation, the desire to know more about the protest or natural curiosity. From the young man who took a book on Indochina because it is a family story (BD Lyon, April 2016), to this homeless person who was looking for books on foxes (BD Lyon, April 2016), passing by a couple who, looking at books of philosophy, had this exchange: she, "*Sartre, is a moron no?*" and he, who began to explain existentialism (BD Lyon, May 2016), the palette of visitors and their relationship with books is multiple.

The organisers are for the most part librarians. In Lyon, only three persons are not librarians, ex-librarians or aspirant librarians. In Paris, in one of the exchanges on the mailing list about contents, it was asked to put aside their librarianship analysis (Mailing List, Paris, 2016). However, these librarians are all present on the BD as individuals and not as professionals. Through their presence, they question the political vocation and the political engagement at the heart of the profession of librarian. This vocation, on several occasions (Lahary, 2005; Merklen, 2013) erased to the profit of a quotidian form of management, seems to be seized again by these librarians, who found in another form of the library the possibility to express their vocation.

Non-librarians are often librist<sup>7</sup>. The junction between the two bodies takes place at the level of the Commons, the sharing of knowledge being considered as a mode of action. Among the non-librarians of Lyon, one of them has a real consideration for librarians. He will say several times to visitors: "*BD is Nuit Debout with the expertise of librarians*" (BD Lyon, April 2016). Indeed, this library expertise is not mobilized on BD, as it could be in the library of Occupy Wall Street, which has been cataloged for example. The books could not circulate and the organisers noted, "*Unlike the People's Library, Oakland and the Puerta del Sol, BD has books of lesser quality but which circulate more*" (Mailing List, Paris, April 2016). On the other hand, this library expertise was mobilised at other times in the interactions with visitors. To this young man who asks if the BD has the discourse of Jaurès on the crisis of Morocco of

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<sup>6</sup> Bibliothèque Sans Frontière / Libraries without Borders: a charitable organisation which provides books.

<sup>7</sup> We call « Librist » persons engaged in the defence and the promotion of free softwares.

1905, which the BD did not possess, librarians explained the functioning of public libraries, advise him and direct him to the public libraries (BD Lyon, June 2016). The expertise will also be found, as will be seen later, in two fields: in the selection of the documents and in mediation.

Over this description of different actors, we can see an acknowledgement of each expertise met on the BD. Donors have their expertise, visitors too, librarians too. In this way, the BD offers a place where the knowledge is not proposed by expert, but organized by expert. This equality face to the knowledge is changing the recognition of role of everyone in the collective creation of the society. In this case, the library is not at the service of the community, but it is the community itself.

### 3/ The interactions

On the other hand, visits are more or less important depending on the weather (several exchanges on the list shown that rain, cold and wind are (rightly) considered as a barrier to BD attendance); on the phase (installation, struggle or future), on the places. The more the occupied square is empty, the less the library is frequented. The reports often deplore the low level of participation at Nuit Debout and consequently the low involvement in the BD. One of the organizers ends by saying: *"It's not even with one's own group anymore; it's going to end up in a buddy's flat"* (BD Lyon, June 2016). But, if the visitors were relatively not many, the interactions were strong. The visitors came rarely only to consume books. They have the will to discuss with the organisers. The speaking and the exchange are truly at the heart of the project.

There are several levels of discussions: either between the visitors and the organiser, or directly between the visitors. We could notice a waterfall effect created by the BD, having a document or a practice of the BD as a first part. In this way, a presentation of the Piratebox<sup>8</sup> to a father and his daughter leads to a debate between them and two other visitors on the community in our society irrigated by Internet (BD Lyon, April 2016). An institution said: *"A BD modest in books and in gifts but wealthy in exchanges, smiles and sudden downpour"* (Mailing List, Paris, June 2016).

The interactions are about different subjects:

- Either linked with the mobilisation. Thus, a young man asks counsel to the organisers, explaining that he was searching to improve his political culture and searching for a publication about anarchism (BD Lyon, May 2016). Some donors were also worried about the utility of their donations to the mobilisation (BD Lyon, April and May 2016). The political discussions are about diverse subjects: taxes, education, community, today's syndicalism, liquid democracy, etc. On the BD, books offer an exchange opportunity, while books in the library are more an opportunity of chosen solitude. The individual experience of reading is here counterbalanced by a community experience of the discussion. This occasion to do society and sociability is largely missed by the public libraries, which centred the social question either on solidarity and job hunting support (Bats, 2015), or on conviviality from the individual perception's point of view (especially in the case of the library as a third place).

- Or linked with the BD itself. Each observation gave us the occasion to meet visitors touched by the principle of the BD. *"It is beautiful what you do!"* (BD Lyon, April and May 2016).

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<sup>8</sup> The BD of Lyon and Paris placed quickly a Piratebox during the operations. It is an electronic device constituted of a Wi-Fi router and a flash drive that allows users to deposit or withdraw files anonymously and locally.

The questions about the functioning of the BD were followed by discussions about the value of exchange and gift. At the same time, visitors are unsettled by this gift experience and by the possibility to take a book without compensation. The gift has several meanings and implications at the BD level. On one hand, one of the organisers speaks about “*knowledge desacralisation*” (BD Lyon, April 2016), putting not only a knowledge at disposal, but putting it at disposal absolutely free and without mediation, without the librarian’s authority who is not necessarily the donor. On the other hand, as the organisers announce it: ‘*The BiblioDebout is a Common*’ (BiblioDebout, 2016). Giving is difficult to perceive in a market society and the experience of the BD is exemplary on this point. The BS wants itself as an implementation of the knowledge commons principles.

In this sense, the perception of a common in a world essentially of the market is not easy to understand for the visitors. Some of them wanted to pay with coins or cigarettes (BD Lyon, April 2016), others said that they do not want to take a book without giving another one (BD Lyon, May 2016), some took the document promising to return with a gift (and some of them did so) (BD Lyon, April and May 2016). The Paris’s BD has known what its organisers their underground passenger, namely a visitor who, under the covert of giving a document, collects a large number of the rather new ones. The exchange dynamics is especially unbalanced that this visitor is suspected of reselling the books. After several exchanges, sometimes sharp, and over several months, with this unexpected visitor, the organisers thought they have succeeded to make him understand the principle of gift and counter-gift. If the experience of giving can be contagious, the contagion is facilitated in an environment already open to the idea, as it is for the people who attend Nuit Debout. For others, experience without explanation does not seem to be sufficient.

Otherwise, the question for BD to make activities was asked, especially conferences and readings both to link the BD and the mobilisation, and to highlight unknown texts. Opinions are divided on this subject in the BD. In Lyon, one of the organisers thinks that the mediation must be as limited as possible so that the book is the most desacralised (BD Lyon, April 2016). In Paris, on the other hand, mediation was considered as another action within Nuit Debout, often in partnership with other commissions: poetry, museums, etc. “*For Sunday, I propose a reading of a text by Marguerite Duras on the painter Aki Kuroda published in “Outside”*” (Mailing List, Paris, June 2016). Beyond the elitist aspect of the chosen text, the question posed is the possibility of escaping prescription in participatives libraries. If he does not constitute the collection, does the *bibliodeboutiste* direct visitors' readings through activities and mediations? In other words, can we completely escape the authority of the expert, whether professional librarian or not, who organizes a service of knowledge in the service of a mobilization?

The mediation is not the only way chosen to convey the gift example and the type of mobilisation bring by the BD. Consequently, on the BD or on its website, the goal is to reveal what can be done. “*We need of a new consciousness of the importance of these “things that are commons for us”.*” (BiblioDebout, 2016b).

This awareness is first proposed to the other through interaction and discussion about BD. Thus, some visitors announce that they want to do or imagine the benefits of doing a BD on another place than Nuit Debout, or as another way of understanding the libraries of their country, China in this case (BD Lyon, April and May 2016). The interaction continues on the internet with the publication of the organisers' reports. In the mailing list, organisers tell each day the night before and their experience as *Bibliodeboutistes*, interactions, bad weather,

clashes with the forces of law and order. Regularly, the other organisers propose to publish these testimonials<sup>9</sup> on the website<sup>10</sup>. We find here two things: on the one hand, the need to build a common story, which creates a strong solidarity between the individuals taking part in the BD (organisers or visitors). David Lankes recalled in 2015 the importance for public libraries to create such stories, especially in times of political crisis (Lankes, 2015). Finally, we find in the publication of these reports the idea that affects are one of the levers of political action and must be aroused by images to which we can identify (Lordon, 2016). By bringing to see what is usually invisible or hidden from the media, the BD creates new affects and potentially new commitments to Nuit Debout, to the commons, to knowledge.

#### 4/ The collections

The BD proposed printed books or leaflets, and digital documents, via a Piratebox. Documents are mostly for adults, but very soon, some books for children or teenagers were added to the collection. For the content, the organizers of BD called to “*prefer books that make sense in a such events: books that help you to build your own involvement, that give you to think and to feel, and that you would like to make read to other participants of Nuit Debout.*” (BiblioDebout, 2016b). Finally, books proposed with different contents:

- Political books in direct link with the mobilization, on work, ecology and democracy, etc.
- Practical leaflets in link with strike actions.
- Humanities books, not directly linked with mobilization, but of which content that is considered as useful by visitors to develop a political culture (BD Lyon, April 2016). Books of classical philosophy (Aristotle, Platon, Rousseau) have a great success (BD Lyon, May 2016).
- Books for entertainment: literature, comics, historical books, that are not in linked with Nuit Debout, but that, for participants, are still useful for experimenting the process of gift and the commons (BD Lyon, May 2016).

Because the BD is participative, the collection is depending of gifts. As we have seen gifts are related to commitment to Nuit Debout or very opportunistic, as this family giving 4 boxes of books after the grand-mother's passing (BD Lyon, April 2016). The selection of books is questioning participants. When the four boxes have been given, the organisers decided not to keep books they did not want, as books about Sarkozy ou Pasqua<sup>11</sup> (BD Lyon, April 2016). Later, they decided to keep out of the stand a leaflet, very closed from the ideas of Nuit Debout, but considered by organizers as incentive to violence (BD Lyon, May 2016). If the Bibliodeboutistes have authority to define the limits of the legitimacy of documents, the debate was important on what is to legitimate or not. This debate was particularly vigorous after the following events: first, the visit of the Nuit Debout by a right-wing French intellectual, Finkelkraut, who received a very bad welcome on the occupied square, second the publishing of a paper in a left-wing paper<sup>12</sup>. Despite the paper was written by a participant of BD, the journal changed the title for « Bibliodebout, sexist book, romances, have we to censor books given?» (Richard, 2016). The mention of censor, the reaction of mass media to the rejection of Finkelkraut led to a debate amongst the Bibliodebout: “[*We need to discuss the orientation we want to give to Bibliodebout, particularly, following the recent debates (do we have to select or not, political orientation or not, ideal library or not...*)” (Mailing List,

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<sup>9</sup> Anonymous.

<sup>10</sup> See reports published between April and September on the website: <http://biblio-debout.org/index.php/2016/04/>

<sup>11</sup> Two right-wing political men.

<sup>12</sup> In the *Nouvel Observateur* (Nouvel Obs).

Paris, April 2016). Two opinions are developed. In one hand, the mobilisation is in the heart of BD, so it is legitimate to censor books that are in opposition with the ideas of Nuit Debout (new form of democracy, equality, hear what invisible people have to say, etc.). In another hand, the gift experience is in the heart of the BD, so the political value and scientific or literary quality of books are less important than the direct experience. This last opinion will be the more present in the BD, even if some visitors don't understand this, as this woman asking "You have no racist book, isn't it? You would refuse it, isn't it?" (BD Lyon, May 2016).

## Conclusion

The participative library BiblioDebout was giving access to knowledge, and, in the same time, proposing a political experimentation. This is inspirational for public libraries. If empowerment is condition for quality of life, so our libraries should be interested to propose to their community a shared and equalitarian project, to produce pictures and affects able to build political action, and to think about their own commitment towards society. BiblioDebout helps to question the political vocation of Public Libraries, a trendy topic in France today. To take on this role, the public libraries would have to redefining their neutrality, Increasing participative projects, not only « making society », but « making community », and finally redefining the role of institution in being not what is setting, but what is moving.

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