

# Phrase of the Day: Nostalgie de la Boue

Tom Wolfe, probably most famous for authoring *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and *The Right Stuff*, has a fascinating explanation of the phrase in his book *Radical Chic*. In it, Wolfe lampoons wealthy, New York socialites of the 1970s for embracing groups like the Black Panthers who ultimately wanted to upend the social order that the socialites wanted to maintain. He writes:

*“Nostalgie de la boue is a nineteenth-century French term that means, literally, ‘nostalgia for the mud.’”*

Later, Wolfe nicely expands upon the meaning:

*“Nostalgie de la boue tends to be a favorite motif whenever a great many new faces and a lot of new money enter Society. New arrivals have always had two ways of certifying their superiority over the hated ‘middle class.’ **They can take on the trappings of aristocracy, such as grand architecture, servants, parterre boxes, and high protocol; and they can indulge in the gauche thrill of taking on certain styles of the lower orders.** The two are by no means mutually exclusive; in fact they are always used in combination.”*

The phrase has roots in 1800s France, and points to a common effect of wealth on our human nature. Here Wolfe gives us a past example:

*“In England during the Regency period [1811-1820], nostalgie de la boue was very much the rage. London socialites during the Regency adopted the flamboyant capes and wild driving styles of the coach drivers, the ‘bruiser’ fashions and hair styles of the bare-knuckle prize fighters, the see-through,*

*jutting-nipple fashions of the tavern girls, as well as a reckless new dance, the waltz. Such affections were meant to convey the arrogant self-confidence of the aristocrat as opposed to the middle-class striver's obsession with propriety and keeping up appearances."*

But then he exposes the hypocrisy of it all...

*"From the beginning it was pointless to argue about the sincerity of Radical Chic. Unquestionably the basic impulse, 'red diaper' or otherwise, was sincere. But, as in most human endeavors focused on an ideal, there seemed to be some double-track thinking going on. On the first – well, one does have a sincere concern for the poor and the underprivileged and an honest outrage against discrimination. One's heart does cry out – quite spontaneously! – upon hearing how the police have dealt with the [Black] Panthers... On the other hand – on the second track in one's mind, that is – one also has a sincere concern for maintaining a proper East Side life-style in New York Society. And this concern is just as sincere as the first, and just as deep. It really is. It really does become part of one's psyche. For example, one must have a weekend place, in the country or by the shore ... It is hard to get across to outsiders an understanding of how absolute such apparently trivial needs are. One feels them in his solar plexus."*

Yes, the wealthy socialites feel for the poor and oppressed and they will put on airs of caring, but ultimately their own self-interest will win the day. Wolfe captures all of this in his portrayal of a Radical Chic fundraiser for the Black Panthers in the 1970s:

*"The emotional momentum was building rapidly when Ray 'Masai' Hewitt, the Panther's Minister of Education and member of the Central Committee, rose to speak. Hewitt was an intense, powerful young man and in no mood to play the diplomacy game.*

*Some of you here, he said, may have some feelings left for the Establishment, but we don't. We want to see it die. We're Maoist revolutionaries, and we have no choice but to fight to the finish...*

...

*A few who remembered the struggles of the Depression were profoundly moved, fired up with a kind of nostalgie de that old-time religion. But more than one Park Avenue matron was thrown into a Radical Chic confusion. The most memorable quote was: 'He's a magnificent man, but suppose some simple-minded schmucks take all that business about burning down buildings seriously?'*

The same attitudes and activities are alive and well today. There are those of great wealth who want to keep that wealth, but at the same time give voice to those who want to burn it all down. Sadly, things will burn and lives will be destroyed, but those who give oxygen to the fires will likely escape accountability.

Something to keep in mind as you watch the news.