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A COLLECTIVE DISCUSSION AROUND THE PARTYZINE PROJECT IN BORDEAUX

Méline Germes

“In the zine, I was shocked by the question ‘How do you ensure that things go well?’ I couldn’t understand it, what it means, it was beyond imagination. Because NOTHING is done. We have to do EVERYTHING ourselves.”

Despite the pandemic context, we succeeded in organizing a PartyZine workshop with Associated Partners Université Populaire de Bordeaux and Ella Bordai on October 1, 2020, in Bordeaux. The aim was to animate participants to write their own zine and to facilitate discussion between them afterwards. Ella Bordai was in charge of the moderation of the workshop, employing methods from popular education. After the participants worked on their own zines and discussed these topics in pairs, Ella Bordai led a discussion about the outcomes, experiences and ideas they had written and talked about. This workshop was a good opportunity to observe how participants reacted to the PartyZine. This short text outlines the results of the discussion.

Eight participants attended the workshop, seven women and one man, all cis-gendered and in their 20s or 30s. No issues related to racism, disability or neurodivergence were raised – leading to the hypothesis that no participant was presently concerned by these issues.

The discussion thus reflects only a partial point of view on questions of partying, drugs and gender. The zine extracts reproduced here do not all come from the workshop.

Mandatory Consumption?

Partying is seen as a way to take a break from everyday life and let oneself go – and this is the reason why consuming drugs or alcohol is such an important part of going out: *“Today my brain takes a break.”* At the same time, consumption seems to most discussion participants to be mandatory. They criticized commercial partying contexts such as bars with incentives to drink more. Peer pressure seems to play a bigger role in making consumption of alcohol or drug mandatory: *“don’t spoil the party.”* Depending on the partying context, the substances consumed and the peer pressure will differ. A similar level of consumption of similar substances appears to play a group-building role. One participant also said that *“being in love can lead to giving in”*: social and affective relationships are at stake in all partying settings, and conforming to unwritten rules is part of maintaining these settings.

Between Control and Self-Affirmation

The seven women participating to the workshop reported gendered consumption.

Most prominently discussed was the practice of self-control and restriction

An exception to mandatory consumption: partying sober together. This possibility is described in one response in French to the PartyZine question, “What’s it like for other people?” Illustrations in the PartyZine are by Marie Lou Duret.

during parties – and the one and only reason for this is gender. They try to avoid black-outs because of their sense of vulnerability. Monitoring their own consumption and checking their own state of consciousness is a kind of self-governing of one’s body “not because it’s my character, but because I’m a woman.”

The second point is also gender-based but leads to other practices. Knowing that they are in party places dominated by (cis/hetero) masculinities, consumption of substances is used as a way to disinhibit and take over more space, dare more, make the music louder, and push away undesired advances. Still, pushing back only remains possible before a potential black-out.

These narratives are two sides of the same coin: the issue is not the quantity of substances consumed, but the heteronomy of women’s consumption behavior. Their consumption and behavior depend on the masculinities expressed in the setting; they feel that they have to do the work to adjust themselves. There is a gender gap from the participants’ point of view: “They [men] don’t think about it. They wouldn’t even begin to think about it. Us, we think about it all the time.”

Flirting, Affect and Sex

In the mainly heterosexual context set by the discussion participants, flirting, affect and sex imply binary heterosexual encounters – as reflected by the very language used, opposing “us” (women) to “them” (men).

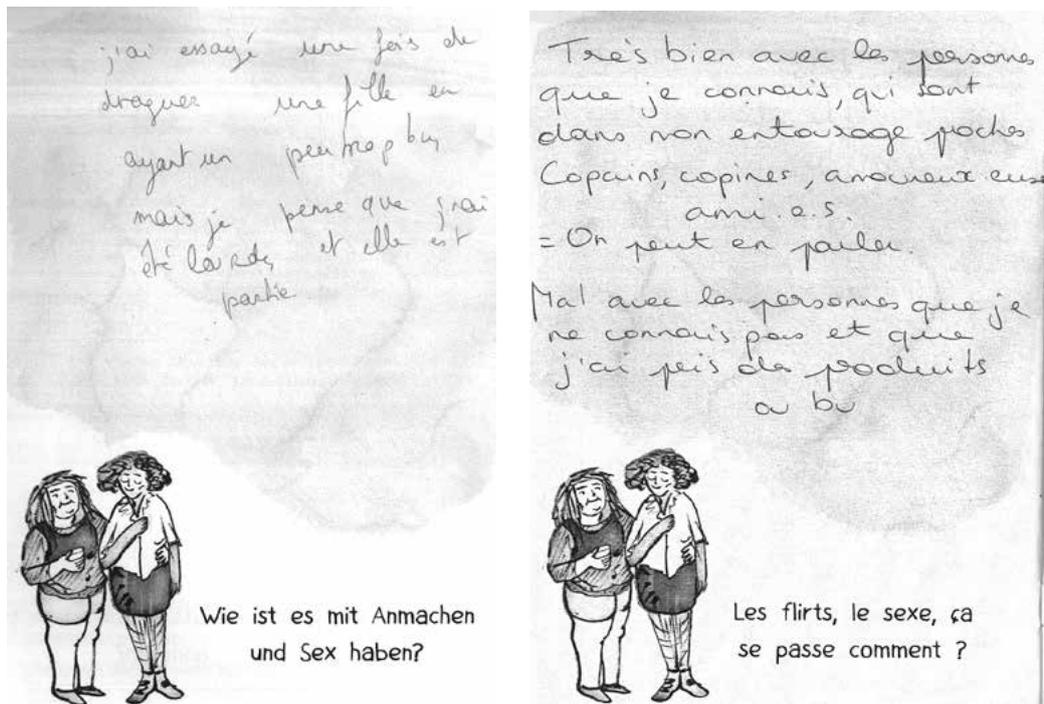
Flirting and first dates are strongly associated with alcohol consumption:



buying someone a glass of wine or a beer, needing a bit of alcohol to disinhibit and take away the fears of rejection. For some participants, alcohol plays a role in their relationships, leading them to the question “*Would we even be able to be together without [alcohol]?*”

The heterosexual gender gap regarding consumption and behaviors in partying appears again in this context. One female participant notes: “*when I come to flirt with a girl under alcohol, I tend to take a guy’s role*” – at the risk of annoying her flirt. In order to avoid precisely this situation, a young female participant who parties mostly at [student] friends’ places avoids staying too long at night. “*I call this the ‘chick market.’ They want to fuck and we’re all going to end up in bed, they kind of compete.*”

This was the only time when a name was put on the widely euphemized issue everyone had in the back of their minds: heterosexual men wanting to fuck women [or any other people] and being



When alcohol blurs flirting boundaries. Two responses in French to the PartyZine question, “Flirting and sex: what’s it like?”

able to trespass against their well-being and good party feelings to reach this desire. The masculinities these women have to adapt to are masculinities performing gendered and sexualized annoyance, harassment, urging and coercion. Unspoken but showing under the surface is the fear of masculine sexual misbehavior, even minor, that completely disturbs the party from other points of view.

Consumption in nightlife settings opens spaces for initiating, performing and sometimes enforcing relationships (whatever they are) using interpersonal power.

“I Don’t Want a Society Like This”: Imagining New Partying Spaces

The self-reflection, dialog and collective discussion around the PartyZine showed a quite unanimous sentiment: none of the participants likes how partying and consuming usually happens. While there were expressions of helplessness about the complexity of the issue – in particular in terms of the economic interests of commercial consumption venues – even in this small workshop some possibilities for better

practices and change were outlined.

The female participants are used to dealing with these issues on an individual level: relying on the female friends they go out with to take care of each other; or finding allies to bond with in the place itself. This is what the participant is referring to in the quote at the beginning of this text: “we have to do *EVERYTHING* ourselves.” Indeed, some of the responses mentioned in the discussion served to enhance the (sole) responsibility on women: working on the “self-sexualization” of women as a part of their education; incentives to “self-defense”; “being able to ask for help or to decline it.”

Towards the end of the discussion, the only male participant, who had stayed silent so far, was invited to contribute. He described his role at parties (mostly festivals) as an observer and helper, trying to be aware of problematic situations. The question of whether or not to intervene was central to him: Will his help be met with rejection? Shouldn’t he avoid taking the place of the woman who is supposed to develop her own ability to respond to harassment? While the discussion mostly showed how he-

gemonic intoxicated masculinities are challenging the wholehearted participation of women in nightlife, this participant showed another side of hegemonic masculinities: the need to be recognized as a helper and so-called “nice guy,” individualizing the question of harassment and ultimately making women responsible for it. By doing so, he also avoided reflecting on his own consumption (echoing the above-quoted comment “they wouldn’t even begin to think about it”), his own control, self-affirmation or trip, and how it influences his interactions with others (or not).

While the empowerment of a social group that is being raised and socialized to be submissive to sexist hierarchization is a very important issue, it is also important to see that the sexism encountered and performed around the use of substances in party settings is not an individual issue but a collective issue.

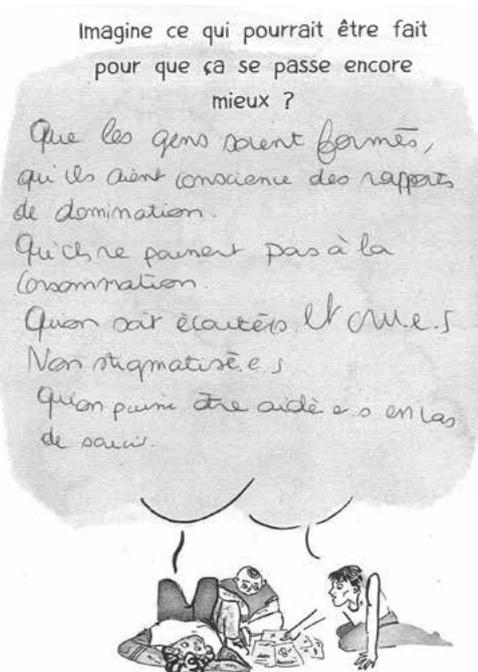
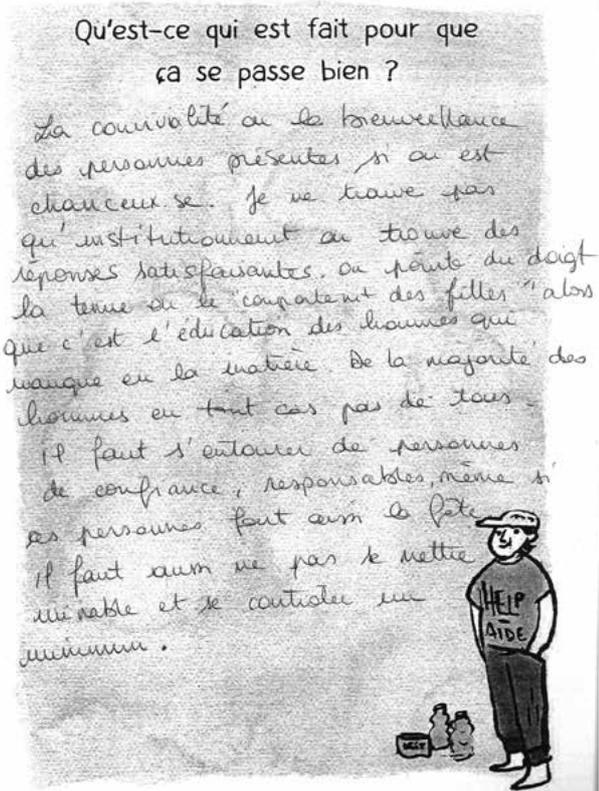
Two participants reported positive experiences where they felt safe because of collective measures taken. The first one, a feminist festival in the country – mostly women, lots of friends, visible prevention and harm reduction, emergency number – contributed to her

well-being and allowed her to consume without second thoughts. The second one took place in a commercial venue: bouncers¹ were in charge of approaching very drunk people to accompany them to the toilet and care for them until they felt better – instead of throwing them out in the street in the middle of the night.

As an ideal, one participant mentioned the organization of free and safe public transportation at night, allowing anyone to come back home on their own at any time, as well as prevention and harm reduction presences on-site, with offerings and providers sensitive to gender issues. Another participant stated the need for better, non-institutional and relatable actions and education directed towards younger people in order to help them regulate their consumption.

“Bars, clubs [and most festivals] are places that are made by and for rich, abled men. We would need a concept of harm reduction, with prevention stands, taking gender issues into account, in order for it to be really accessible to everyone.”

1 I have to remark that bouncers are known to endorse racist and sexist prejudices and behaviors, and thus cannot be trusted without further caution to care about marginalized people.



Two responses in French to the PartyZine questions, “How do you ensure that things go well?” and, “Imagine what could make things go even better?”