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Recomposing the Nights of the Pandemic and Night-Time Avenues of Under-Tourism in French Cities

**From Overtourism to Undertourism
Sustainable scenarios in post-pandemic times
Valeria Pecorelli, 2021, UNICOPLI, pp. 99-113**

Luc Gwiazdzinski

Introduction

The night is a dimension that has long been forgotten by the city, economics, tourism and even by academic research, yet it has gradually become part of current events (Gwiazdzinski, 2005). Colonized by light and daytime activities, urban nightlife has recently become a coveted market, a field of innovation for public policy, a special lifestyle, a tourist sector in its own right, and an indicator of the vitality of cities and communities (Gwiazdzinski, 2015).

In France, the COVID-19 public health emergency and the lock-down measures and curfews enforced by the authorities have had a particularly marked impact on night-time economic and cultural actors, who have been obliged to halt their activities, as well as on a nightlife sector that reportedly generates 100,000 jobs and a turn-over of €2 billion¹. Movement between areas and between countries has been severely restricted, which has ended up destroying night activities and night tourism, thereby silencing our cities.

Based on work conducted during this past, unusual year², I examine some of the strategies and tactics deployed by nightlife actors to adapt to the conditions and restrictions imposed by public health authorities, and point out some apparent paradoxes. In Chinese, the word “crisis” is composed of two characters. While the first means “danger”, the second points to an opportunity. After identifying the problems and risks for the tourist sector, the city, and society, which are inherent in the current situation, I situate my reflection on the night and tourism within a dimension of “ad-venture”, in Jankelevitch’s (2017) sense of “what we live and hope for”: “*the emergence of the future*”. Following on tourism’s previous excessive exploitation of the night, the time is ripe to explore underground, nocturnal avenues of sub-tourism.

A progressive structuring

Prior to the public health emergency, the nightlife industry had been gradually self-organizing, and had made significant progress in terms of structuring and governance. Beyond the regulation of conflicts between the city that works, the city that has fun, and the city that sleeps, the economic and cultural actors had come together to make their presence felt in the debate by highlighting their economic weight and the number of jobs they provide. Colonized by daytime activities, the night is now a central time-space, a societal issue that has earned a place in scientific journals, popular newspapers, and the regional press.

¹ “La nuit doit revoir le jour” (Night must see the day again), Sneg & cie, 7 May 2020.

² ANR Smartnights, enquêtes avec la plateforme nationale de la vie nocturne (ANR Smartnights, surveys with the national nightlife platform).

The night is an economic sector in its own right, which is developing and striving to self-structure. Nightlife has become a criterion of attractiveness and a key resource (Guibert, 2012) for local communities. In only a few years, it has also become part of the public policy agenda, with a dual logic of control and development, and frequently with an emphasis on improving the quality of life of both residents and visitors. In the face of pressures and tensions, authorities are trying both to maintain control over the night (regulating raves, imposing curfews, enacting municipal by-laws limiting traffic, etc.) and to make urban nights more accessible and hospitable via a variety of initiatives (lighting, free events, transport, shelters, etc.).

At the same time, in many cities (Paris, Sydney, Berlin, etc.), studies and diagnoses have proliferated in an attempt to “shed light” on the night. “Assemblies” have been held, and “night councils” set up in Paris, Nantes, and Geneva. In some fifty cities around the world, “night mayors” have been appointed to deal with this cross-cutting issue. As a sign of the times, an interdisciplinary field of research is gradually taking shape around *Night Studies* (Gwiazdzinski, Maggioli, Straw, 2018), drawing together historians, geographers, urban planners, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, ethnologists, philosophers, biologists, culture and communication specialists, political scientists, and architects. All over the

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world, symposiums, seminars, studies, theses and exhibitions are multiplying around the *Night-time Economy*, with operational relays and numerous international forums³.

Night tourism meanwhile has gradually established itself within the domain of public policy. Over the last ten years, we have witnessed the advance of “urban night tourism” (Gwiazdzinski, 2009) and the “touristification of nightlife” (Giordano, Nofre, Mateu, Crozat, 2018). Night tourism has become a driving force and a metropolitan laboratory (Gwiazdzinski, 2013). As a sign of this evolution, in France, the importance of nightlife in urban tourism has recently been recognized at the ministerial level. A “centre of excellence” has been set up to unite nightlife players and tourism professionals in a drive to develop offerings and promote them effectively to a foreign tourist clientele, with a precise roadmap and “22 measures to turn nightlife into an international tourist asset”⁴. This recognition stands in contrast with the fate reserved for the urban night in recent months.

Indeed, by closing businesses, limiting the right to move around, and imposing the obligation to keep others at a distance, COVID-19 measures endanger the economy, the culture, and our ways of life. This scenario of constraint is paradoxical and counterintuitive in cities as densely populated areas, which are places for gathering and “maximizing [the very] interactions” (Claval, 1982) that are currently being restricted. It is all the more paradoxical for night-time and party organizing actors, whose job is to “arrange opportunities for meeting” – but are prevented from doing so –, and for the night itself, as a time when distances and barriers generally lapse. This threefold challenge puts cities, nights, and their actors and inhabitants under pressure. The future of tourism and of our cities depends in part on the solutions that they will be able to develop in conjunction with all the stakeholders.

A particularly hard-hit space-time

Just take a walk in any city after 6 p.m. to get the measure of the situation.

³ “Tbilisi International Night Time Economy Forum” in December 2018 in Tbilisi (Georgia) or “ANZ Night Time Economy Forum”, with an evocative subtitle “Creating Vibrant Cities After Dark” in June 2019.

⁴ Pôles d'excellence touristique. 22 mesures pour faire de la vie nocturne un facteur touristique à l'international 13 (Poles of tourist excellence. 22 measures to turn nightlife into an international tourist asset), 2015, Foreign and International development Ministry.

The night, or rather night actors, have been the hardest hit by the lockdown and have been forgotten during it. In France, professionals in this industry have angrily pointed out that the government “*made many commitments in favour of different economic segments, without even acknowledging the nightlife sector*”⁵. Yet the crisis has weakened these economic and cultural actors and is threatening the night dynamic, at the expense of tourism but also of urbanity, or our capacity to live together in cities.

On examining the chronology of this disaster, we find that prior to the public health emergency, tensions were already coming to bear on urban nightlife and concerns were being expressed about overly strict supervision (Straw, 2020) or, on the contrary, about excessive noise and light pollution. Now, the pandemic has dealt a severe blow to this nightlife dynamic and night tourism. The crisis has particularly impacted the night-time economy and its various public and private actors. In France, the first shutdowns announced affected the drinking establishments sector (bars, cafés, clubs, etc.), that is to say, some 45,000 establishments; plus, the 170,000 restaurants and 1,800 festivals that play a major role in both local everyday dynamics and tourism/nightlife. Cinemas and theatres were closed, shows and festivals cancelled, and the entire breadth of the musical and cultural scene was impacted.

The same thing has been happening in most countries. Internationally and nationally, traffic restrictions have prohibited the influx of tourists. Locally, as always, the first freedoms to be taken away in the event of a crisis have been those related to moving around at night. In France, as of March 25 2020, in addition to national lockdown measures, 112 cities – home to over 2 million French people – were subjected to a night-time curfew⁶. In the *Alpes-Maritimes* region, the *préfecture* issued an order imposing a curfew from 10 pm to 5 am in all coastal towns and other cities of over 10,000 inhabitants. This was intended to stop “unessential” outings and thereby the spread of COVID-19, thus subjecting the night to the “dicta” of the day and attributing a singular character to the former. Furthermore, some of the potential nightlife actors

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were absent, especially students, who often went back to live in their home towns. After the summer lifting of the lockdown, the 14 December 2020 decree enforced a curfew between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. As of 8 p.m. on Tuesday, December 15, daytime and inter-regional travel was allowed, but travel was prohibited from 8 pm to 6 am, except for valid work, family, and health reasons, missions of general interest, or walking a pet, all upon presentation of a travel certificate. The rationale invoked was saving time in an attempt to avoid overwhelming the healthcare system while averting a full lockdown. Better yet, in early January 2021, a 6pm curfew was introduced. As I write these lines in mid-March, the curfew is still in place. Why such relentless attacks on the night?

Why are authorities invariably afraid of the night, of parties, and of young people? Why are they unwilling to trust responsible and experienced professionals, thus prompting the organization of clandestine parties, with their attendant excesses and stigmatization? Why drive the population to rush about in stores and on public transport networks between 5pm and 6 pm despite the risks pointed up by various studies? As early as January 2021, researchers from the Toulouse University Hospital virology laboratory demonstrated that in the Toulouse urban area, the curfew had led to “an increase in the number of people testing positive”. The regulatory approach also seems to have taken precedence over acknowledgement of local dynamics. Measures introduced abruptly from the top down are often based on a lack of

⁵ “La nuit doit revoir le jour”, Sneg & cie, 7 May 2020.

⁶ *France Inter* radio station, 24 March 2020.

knowledge about nightlife, night partying and its actors, and the night's increasing prominence in terms of economic value, employment, attractiveness, creativity, culture, and as a key component of our lifestyles and well-being.

For many expert figures, such ignorance often goes hand in hand with a lack of recognition, or even contempt, for particular artistic forms and venues such as the electro, rap or metal scenes. Such a negative approach to the night, which is invariably treated in terms of problems, difficulties, and fear, is highly questionable. For a long time, the night was poorly studied and little understood, to the point that we might even coin the phrase a “night of data” – so lacking was the information. And the night time is still often stigmatized. Because it partly deprives them of their vision, humans fear the night. This particular moment in time is dreaded, while daylight is perceived positively: something is said to “shed light on” or “highlight” a given matter. Until recently, city officials, technicians, urban planners, and researchers saw the city as a daily 16-hour period, glossing over the eight hours of the night or simply trying to keep them under control.

During the first lockdown, the archipelago configuration of the night was extended to the day. The emergency response to the virus staked out a new urban geography (Gwiazdzinski, Straw, Maggioli, 2019), that of the “lockdown archipelago” (Gwiazdzinski, 2020). As new islanders, under house arrest, entire populations strove to organize themselves from home, while seeking exchanges with the outside world by means of digital information technologies. Delivery staff, who remained exposed to the disease, ensured urban coastal movement, as it were, between these islands. For many urbanites, the street became a space seen from afar, from a window or a balcony.

Not just discotheques and nightclubs, but the entire nocturnal world has been left floundering, and with it, a part of our social life. The night is a special time for partying and a key moment for social interaction in our cities, neighbourhoods, and villages. When the curfew kicks off, when partying becomes impossible, when venues close, when events are cancelled, when those whose occupation revolves around the promotion of conviviality, pleasure, and encounters are forbidden to do their job, then, a key economic and employment sector, but also a culture, an art of living, the whole universe of the night, and our mental health come directly under threat. It is vital to meet, share, and marvel together. What will happen if 30% of night establishments close down? And what will our cities turn into then, with their empty, wasteland nights? According to the *Chambre syndicale des lieux musicaux, festivals et nocturnes* (employers' federation for musical, festival, and nightlife venues), over 300 companies accounting for 30% of the industry have already filed for bankruptcy. Before the public health emergency, pop and electronic music yielded some €930 million in annual revenue, eighty percent of which was generated by the clubs, discotheques, and festivals airing these musical genres.

Adaptations and paradoxes

The emergency constraints have not prevented the actors of the night from trying to adapt, innovate, and develop a forward-looking analysis. Some users, on the other hand, have been prompted to take “side roads”, to deceive and hide, thus restoring a transgressive flavour to nights that had sometimes been somewhat too well-behaved.

In the outdoors, “essential” workers have continued their risky night activities during the lockdowns, while the homeless have been left to fend for themselves. Restaurants and Michelin-starred chefs have offered take-outs and delivered their dishes to customers locked in their homes. Specialty companies have also delivered home decoration supplies. Chat and video conferencing apps have become all the rage as a way to organize parties. Free apps have been used for entertainment purposes: to play games remotely, or to arrange quizzes and music “blind tests”. Some have opted to throw a *Netflix* or *Disney+* party. For the time being, partying has moved inside our homes or takes place on balconies connected to the world. As for

professionally organized nightlife, this gig has also migrated to social networks, where concerts have multiplied – such as “*Saturday Night Lockdown*” in Paris – along with parties and remote aperitifs or “digital aperitifs” as widely publicized in the media⁷. Drive-in cinema has been brought back, with a national tour due to start at the Quinconces in Bordeaux on 16 May 2021. Many parties have been held in parking lots.

After much grumbling, party organizers and other night-life actors have multiplied their initiatives, attempting to “make do” between outdoor events in public spaces and online offerings. They have displayed responsibility, creativity, and innovation in imagining virtuous new arrangements between establishments of various sizes and kinds spanning the public and private sectors. From the very first lockdown, they have sought to cooperate with local authorities, displaying a future-oriented perspective by asking questions about partying ethics and sustainability and proposing the implementation of nightlife ecosystems at the neighbourhood scale with the participation of residents⁸. Meanwhile, residents have launched movements of their own such as “*Droit au sommeil Paris*” (Right to sleep Paris), which conducted a survey among “victims of nocturnal noise pollution in Paris”, highlighting the problems caused by ephemeral [temporary, pop-up] night-time terraces, alleged to have “undermined efforts and progress” in relation to sound pollution.

In a push for the right to enjoy the night and to party, nightlife actors have rallied around conferences such as “*Dancer Demain*” (Dancing Tomorrow) organized by the Technopol collective in May 2020, symposia such as the “*États généraux de la fête*” (General Assembly of the Party Organization Sector) convened in December 2020 by the bars association, or networking on an international scale through the Global Nighttime Recovery Plan. These forums have allowed actors to exchange views, weigh up the situation, and even propose tools and actions for responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 emergency, including via the design of appropriate health protection measures. By bringing together actors from the cultural, nightlife, and risk prevention/mitigation sectors, along with political representatives, technical representatives of public authorities, and academics, this set of assemblies, workshops, debates, and encounters has helped all those involved to take stock of a world that has been weakened by the emergency but is resisting and reorganizing. The sector, therefore, is in the process of restructuring itself, innovating, exploring critical issues, seeking recognition, and proposing paths forward, in the context of a new and unprecedented dialogue between the local and the global, between actors in the field and public authorities.

These initiatives have often been documented in official reports such as the white paper of the *États généraux de la fête*, along with proposals that go beyond a mere cataloguing of the sector’s demands to bring into the open the “right to celebrate”. Furthermore, this cross-cutting set of reflections (spanning health, culture, economics, security, public peace, urbanism, sustainable development, the digital, solidarity, mobility...) and collective approaches have reminded decision-makers of the need for a “public policy of the night” for cities, districts, rural and peri-urban areas, as well as at the national level. Practical proposals have included the formation of “night councils” throughout the country, but also the creation of an “inter-ministerial committee”, or even a “national night council” that would draw together empirical, technical, scientific, and political approaches. Many actors have flagged the need to work with nightlife professionals rather than incurring the risks associated with clandestine gatherings.

The COVID-19 emergency has brought to the fore the social dimensions of the night, people’s need to meet, and the importance of all the public and private activities that enliven nocturnal

⁷ https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/coronavirus-comment-reussir-son-ape-ro-a-distance-23-03-2020-2368384_23.php.

⁸ Action research workshops “La nuit à l’épreuve du cononavirus”, Laboratoire Pacte et Plateforme nationale de la vie nocturne, 2020.

life in the city. We have all become aware of the value of late night stores, bars, restaurant, cinemas, shows, festivals and all mundane night-

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time activities: collective rituals, which we thought would last for- ever. There is now shared acknowledgment of both their worth and their fragility. Some have even wished that they could once again hear the noise pollution they used to resent. Despite the sector's inventiveness, remote parties, concerts, and events have displayed their limitations, pointing up the obvious: the importance of the body, the senses, physical experience, and meeting in person in generating togetherness and celebration.

During the pandemic, nocturnal activity in the city has thus been confined to a small number of clandestine sites (secret bars whose addresses were circulated covertly), private homes where we could gather with our "loved ones", that is to say, with those who were locked down with us, and exchanges between one balcony and another. Transgressions such as illegal New Year's Day gatherings, including a highly publicized one in Lieuron, Ille-et- Vilaine attended by 2,500 people – and a growing number of others – sparked relentless media backlash and a flow of insults on social media networks attacking young people and celebrations. In March 2021, an "unauthorized carnival" organized in Marseille was attended by over 6,000 people. Photos of the crowd and of participants without masks were widely shared on the Internet. The media and authorities condemned this gathering and the participants' recklessness, while overlooking the fact that the earlier mass celebration in Brittany had not resulted in any "outbreaks". The prosecution of some of the participants led to suspended pris- on sentences, community service, and acquittals. Nevertheless, the collective awareness generated by these events can usefully inform the dynamics of tomorrow's cities.

Hypotheses for the future

At the time of writing (March 2021), no precise date has yet been set for the reopening of night-time amenities. Questions arise surrounding people's need to spend time together after the lockdowns. If nightclubs do not reopen, issues of concern will include: increased pressure on public spaces in the evening time, the greater difficulty of complying with regulations at night, a possible shift to private venues, and an increase in wild, clandestine parties, all of which bear greater risk of conflict, alcohol abuse, or violence, in the absence of expert supervision and prevention strategies. More broadly, and depending on how the epidemic evolves, as well as on the relaxation of public health measures, it is plausible to hypothesize that both daytime and night-time tourism may acquire a more "local" or "regional" focus going forward, with the development of specific offerings within a "season-themed" (Gwiazdzinski, 2013) framework. Indeed, tourism as classically defined – or "*the activity of a person who travels for pleasure, visits a region, a country, a continent other than his own, to quench their curiosity, their taste for adventure and discovery, their desire to enrich their experiences and cultures*" – has currently disappeared. If the consumption of images from elsewhere, remote dialogues with distant interlocutors, virtual visits to museums, and attendance at online concerts and parties is to be called "tourism", then we may hypothesize the emergence of a new form of – specifically nocturnal – tourism that no longer necessarily includes a geographical journey. This would represent the umpteenth adaptation to a changing environment of the concept of tourism (Gwiazdzinski, Cholat, Tritz, Tuppen, 2019), the tourism sector, and its practices. Such a prospect was already on the horizon before the public health emergency, in the context of climate change and transition, but it has been further reinforced by the lockdown.

Nevertheless, for nightlife and tourism, the future remains uncertain. The closure of nightclubs makes a rapid return to nightlife and tourism in its usual forms seem unlikely. In terms of the

out-look for the movement of people between countries, there appears to be little hope of a speedy resumption of international flights, with obvious implications. Economic and cultural nightlife actors are deeply concerned, even though the government and local communities have rallied to support them. Many establishments do not have sufficient liquid assets to tide them over. Owners have not stopped collecting rents. Insurance clauses do not provide for reimbursement and the insurance sector is reluctant to make a greater show of “solidarity”. If the crisis continues, we can only expect bankruptcies, and city centres are thus at risk of being transformed into night-time wastelands. Young people have been under the radar for a long time, although they have been hit hard by the public health measures. They are now making themselves heard and participating in the debate on opening up and celebrating via numerous events such as the “State of Emergency for Youth”⁹.

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The night may in any case be revisited, in a few favoured directions emerging from current research¹⁰ and reflections across a range of expert circles¹¹. With regard to the de-lockdown process and the need for space, one of the keys will again be occupying public space and the outdoors. Constrained by physical distancing regulations, establishments will see their surface area divided by a factor of two, three, or even four, thus putting their viability at risk. If authorities were to be more flexible, we could, for example, imagine more extensive terraces and a broader appropriation of squares, parks, and pedestrian streets. Temporary arrangements may be viewed as contributing to a form of “chrono-urbanism” (Gwiazdzinski, Grisot, Pradel, 2020), as is already the case for the cycle paths that have been deployed in many cities. And where “ephemeral” facilities are concerned, night actors possess valuable experience and know-how. In terms of usage, we might hypothesize the return to a localized practice of the night, a sort of “short night circuit” within one’s own neighbourhood, as we were invited to practice last summer when we went exploring France.

In terms of urban planning, the need for space prompts us to imagine a de-saturation of urban nights, a deconcentration and a wider spreading out of night-time activity across the city and towards the suburbs, but also the organization of tailored events. With discotheques closed, the summer of 2020 – a lull in the epidemic – was marked in Paris by illegal parties in the Bois de Vincennes. Faced with this risk, the city council would prefer to ensure a “*legal and organized offering, with satisfactory sanitary conditions*” and believes that it will be possible to organize “*50 events for 1,000 people*”¹². In any case, nightlife actors will have to re-invent and experiment, engaging all stakeholders in the process: establishments, residents, and end-users. Discussions underway in cities such as Paris and Nantes, for example, confirm the importance of open air settings and public spaces, which currently appear to be the lifeline of the city, of the night, and of “re-invented tourism”. The government’s announcements in mid-March 2021, on the theme of “slowing down without locking down”, reflected the beginnings of a shift in this direction, despite maintaining the curfew at the slightly later time of 7 p.m.

The debates and consultations held during the pandemic with the mobilized nightlife actors show that they too wish to increase their ethical engagement and move towards enhanced social and environmental responsibility. The time has come for them to strengthen their relationship with their environment, contribute to the emergence of night-time ecosystems and clusters, and serve on “night councils” where these exist. The current challenges make it

⁹ 23 March 2021, Youth Assembly. *De l’urgence du lien social: Culture et lieux de convivialité*.

¹⁰ 10 Ongoing research-action workshops. Laboratoire Pacte et Plateforme nationale de la vie nocturne, 2020.

¹¹ Cycle of virtual roundtables: “Danser Demain”, Tecnpol, 9 May 2020

¹² AFP, 12/02/2021.

possible to imagine a greater harmonizing of the night, a more sustainable coexistence, and the quest for a subtle balance and “night thinking”: without lights, there can be no urban night, yet too much lighting kills the night. In view of the public health emergency and curfews prohibiting movement, many municipalities have decided to switch off public lighting.

Researchers with in-depth knowledge of the night have much to say about the day. We may expect the next few months to be enriching. For those involved in the nightlife and tourism sectors, who are called to adapt to a new situation, this will prove a difficult period, but rewarding in terms of experience to be gained. Given the unprecedented situation, political leaders and their administrations will need to leave room for experimentation. Our cities’ futures and our own lifestyles also depend on the success or otherwise of the process, the leeway allowed by public authorities, and collective remedial efforts. Herein lies the ultimate paradox of the present forbidden and stolen nights: for both users and scholars of the night, the curfew has brought a sultry and transgressive edge to nights that had sometimes become a little too well-behaved or overly commercial. Tourism will manage to benefit from this. That is the only certainty we have. Following the excesses of “over-tourism”, the “sub-tourism” approach may well require the underground and the night.

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