

## The nocturnal condition

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**The nocturnal condition**  
**Luc Gwiazdzinski, Geographer (\*)**

*At nightfall, we shall see clearer.*  
Roland Topor

According to the Genesis, “God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning after were the first day.” Just as it happens with the human organism, the city has always had its existence defined by the day/ night cadency. As a period of obscurity symbolized by the curfew, by the stoppage of all activities and closing of the city gates, the night has for a very long time been considered a time of social rest and return to the intimacy of the private sphere.

As a forgotten dimension of the city, the night inspired poets in their search for freedom, served as refuge for scoundrels and disquieted power-structures, which have set out to control it. Mayors, technicians and researchers have for quite some time imagined, lead or managed cities as if they only functioned 16 hour per day, Monday to Saturday, oblivious to the city’s nightlife. Still today, the night usually is absent from reflections related to urbanism, development and territorial management, or merely limited to inconvenient aspects or merely functional ones, such as lighting.

Only artists, writers or poets have had an interest in the urban night. For centuries the ‘other side’ of our cities has remained a space- time largely disinvested by human activity, a “Finisterre”<sup>1</sup> human ambitions have turned against, a last internal frontier that begins now to instigate the appetites.

But times have changed. There is a life after day in our cities where the non-day sometimes makes up two-thirds of the workday. Fortunately for night-birds, the conquest of the night has in the meantime begun. There is a life after day in our cities where the non-day sometimes makes up two-thirds of the workday. Freed from natural problems, our cities liven up under the influence of evermore desynchronized modes of life, of reduced working days or of new lighting and communication technologies. Insofar as society profoundly redefines its nycthemeron<sup>2</sup>, the city reconfigures itself. Human activities progressively open themselves up to the night and compose a new space of work and leisure forcing us to consider the spaces and times of the city under a new guise. Colonized by typically day-related activities, the night is under new pressures. Not always the city which sleeps (and works) and the city which has fun make a good couple. Jobs

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<sup>1</sup> During the pre-Christian era they peregrinated Fisterra and, for many centuries, it was considered as the westernmost spot of land of the known world and – as such – the end of the world. Until today, Cape Finisterre is the final destiny for many pilgrims on the Way of St. James.

<sup>2</sup> The nycthemeron is a physiological unit of time defining, for man and for the majority of animals, a period of wakefulness and a period of sleep, under the cadency of day and night.

involving atypical shifts, specific remuneration for night jobs, electricity outages, night-related commerce, lights, white nights, transport, late opening of retail, pollution (light and noise) or urban violence: between insecurity and freedom, for the better or for the worst, the night is definitely here... And our organizations aren't ready for it.

As a central field of tension in our society, a space of ideas and last-standing frontier of the city, the 'night' has plenty to say to the day'. The night should be open to scientific investigation, to the future, to creativity. The time has arrived to explore the nocturnal archipelago, decode the urban night, discover its actors, its limits, its centers, its margins, its rhythms. In face of pressures resulting from the continuous temporality of the economy and of the system, we should invest in the night, explore the last-standing frontier in the city so as to anticipate conflicts and imagine possible futures of the Urbs and Civitas. We need to place the night in the political agenda and launch a grand debate in favor of more beautiful cities than the ones we live in during the day.

## **A SPACE-TIME IN MUTATION**

*In his constant search to free himself for natural rhythms, Man has little by little colonized the night.*

### **A progressive colonization by daytime activities.**

Human activities progressively open themselves up to the night and compose a new space of work and leisure. With the passing of the centuries, political affirmation as well technical developments with regard to lighting have allowed for the extension of typically day-related activities into the night and the emergence of a nocturnal public space. Under the pressure of the continuous time of the economy and the system, day-related activities increasingly spread into the night, leading to the becoming-day of nocturnal space as the final phase in the artificialization of the city and the death of the original bipolar alternation between day and night.

Between insecurity and freedom, entrepreneurs take over our nights under the risk of losing themselves and leading us to the same fate: marketers of the future who, however, do not promise us the moon. The limits of the 'day' have been surpassed. Natural rhythms have gradually ceased. Daylight saving time allows us to take advantage of public space until later.

Light has with time taken over urban public space, partly wiping out the threatening darkness of our nights and allowing for the continuity of daytime activities. At least in cities, lamp posts turn on before the stars do. Lighting passes from security to pleasure. Sounds, lights, the luminous decorations of buildings, multiply as they swathe the cities of the world with the same coating of yellow light. 'Light designers' sculpt the night, giving to our cities a nocturnal identity. At night, the urban labyrinth rearranges itself. Another city enters the stage with its lights, its decoration, its new actors. The same and yet another city.

At night, the urban labyrinth rearranges itself. Another city enters the stage with its lights, its decoration, its new actors. Industries function continuously in order to maximize their equipments, and, in the majority of sectors, nocturnal work has become trivial. More and more service-providers adhere to the 7 day a week, 24h per day, publicity catch-line, making it a

commonplace. Numerous activities alternate their advantage of nighttime. Stores offer more and more nocturnal events. All over, the supply of night-related leisure expands.

*In a few years, the night has become a separate economic sector. Thematic nights bring in revenue and the nocturnal calendar thickens with the 'Night of the Museums', the 'European Night of Science' in Berlin and other cities, the 'White Nights' in Paris, Rome, Brussels, Montreal and other places.*

All over Europe, legislation on the opening hours for night-related commerce is slackening. In Great Britain, pubs can remain open after 23h. In Germany, metro stations are gradually becoming 'oasis of nocturnal services'. In Poland, many places remain open round the clock. In England, only the opening times of supermarkets are predetermined. In Belgium, a law legalized the famous night shops. In Denmark, shop-owners can now freely choose their working hours during the week. In Spain, there is talk of total liberalization. In Italy, each commune decides its own working hours, while in Portugal shops can stay open until midnight.

Festive nights begin later and later, for the desperation of club- owners. For quite a while now media curfews have ended, with radio and television stations working round the clock. We sleep an hour less than our grandparents and we go to bed later.

**A nocturnal archipelago.** In the majority of cities, public transportation stops, taxis circulate with more expensive rates and in lesser quantity, the waiting times (while they still run) of buses is steeper, making the cost of accessing urban space necessarily rise.

As a consequence of these pressures, the night, defined as an interruption of these activities, is a space-time amounting to three hours: between 1h30 and 4h30. Vanguards also progress in space discontinuously: sectors dedicated to nocturnal leisure have sprung in the hearts of old city centers as well as in competing peripheral areas which have gradually included multiplex businesses and clubs. Automatic points of distribution (for tickets, drinks, etc.) are installed in every corner while conduits of international flux (streets, railroads, airports) cut across metropolitan centers, feeding nocturnal nomads with oasis of permanent services (service stations, retail in train stations or airports...). At the night's core, the city transforms itself into a fortress, accessible only to those on foot or possessing private means of transport. In the majority of cities, public transportation stops, taxis circulate with more expensive rates and in lesser quantity, the waiting times (while they still run) of buses is steeper, making the cost of accessing urban space necessarily rise. It is the image of the archipelago which comes to mind, imposing itself while imagining the geography of urban nightlife

**insecurity and limited freedom.** If the night isn't as dangerous as it is generally said to be, neither is it the space of freedom and of encounter dreamt by the poets. The range of services offered at night reduces. The majority of public spaces close. The limitation or simple absence of public means of transport is a barrier. The night is expensive and free collective spaces are scarce. There is a tendency to segregate and box the publics according to age, sex, taste.

Each, therefore, in his own bar, club, and that is ok, what the night is meant to be. Light and media manipulate us, and just as if we were moths, we flee the stigmatized peripheries to dry out our wings in the neon lights of cities.

## **PRESSURES WHICH HEIGHTEN**

The pressures which heighten upon the night crystallize fundamental economic, political and social interests.

**A critical field of tensions.** In the backdrop, dominant classes perk up to suppress the night. Colonized by light and day- related activities, traversed by users living increasingly alternative rhythms, the night has transformed itself into a critical field of tensions. The continuous time of the economy and the system is opposed to the cyclical rhythm of our bodies and cities. World time clashes with local time. Conflicts multiply between individuals, groups and neighborhoods of the city which sleeps, works, and the ones of the city which enjoys itself. There are rebellions against light- pollution, the fact that it has killed the magic of our nights, depriving us of the stars as a free spectacle. In the city-centers, conflict emerges between residents worried about tranquility and people frequenting bars and clubs, themselves symbols of the surging of a nocturnal public space. Prostitution prospers. In peripheral neighborhoods, the burning of vehicles occurs between 22h and 1h, right when the natural functioning of urban societies (commerce, social centers, police, etc.) has disappeared and the streets are taken over by male adolescents. In many European agglomerations, let us also point out that there is opposition by people living close to airports to the implementation of a 24h public system of transport.

**Alarming conflicts.** Notwithstanding the usual clichés, it is true that urban nightlife questions our capacity of living together. Permanent paradox, the city, place of reunion, of differentiation, is by its very nature the theatre of conflicts between neighborhoods, activities, groups and individuals of a ‘polychronic’ society. During the night, these conflicts, more visible than during the day, allow us to understand the night as a frontline, and this in the sense of demarcating the line delimiting the spatial and temporal conquests of typically day-related activities. We flee more at night. Dark or lit, alive or aseptic, dangerous or policed, centralized or not, warm or repulsive, agitated or calm, the night has invited itself into the party we have usually thought as pertaining to the day. These evolutions instigate us to change our approach to these agglomerations, to cities, and to do so in terms of social time, rhythms. They oblige us to occupy and explore urban nightlife.

**Investigations which are needed.** Researchers, public agencies and citizens, should occupy this space-time so as to anticipate conflicts between individuals, groups or neighborhoods, and together imagine the contours of a new urban life.

It is time to anticipate the predictable developments of nocturnal activities in order to think a global, 24h, management of the city. Researchers, public agencies and citizens, should occupy this space-time so as to anticipate conflicts between individuals, groups or neighborhoods, and together imagine the contours of a new urban life. It is specifically along these spatial and temporal margins, along the peripheries, that the future of our society stages itself. It is necessary to populate and liven up the night while facing the coercive temptations related to security.

**Difficulties.** « The Latin word Nox designates a period of time in which the sun disappears in the horizon » (Dictionnaire Zedler). This definition is no longer apt to describe the night of our cities. It is necessary to go further, even if the night doesn’t unveil itself that easily. In many languages, eight nocturnal hours almost seem like a negation of the day, an invitation for us to follow suit. Noite (Não- oito) Nuit (Non-huit), Night (No-Eight), Nacht (Nein-Acht); Notte; Noche: the night

nurtures paradoxes and seems to have a dark pleasure in erasing clues. Those who want to capture it, know there is always a game of craps out there which makes the night evade any possible equation.

**Paradoxes.** One may expect the night to bring counsel, but, in our language, it is the day that enlightens positively. Always. At night, colors disappear, one distinguishes badly forms and contours. However, the night discloses man and the city. Seen from satellites or on a plane, it is the night, the millions of urban lights, which reveal the presence of man on earth. It was at night, guided by the stars, that maritime civilizations set off to discover the world, and Columbus discovered the New World. It was at night, from the height of a promontory, that the organization of cities was better understood. Last paradox: if the fairy of electricity killed the night, she gave birth to a magical couple: the city and its night. Without light there isn't urban nightlife. And what a show, a spectacle, it is! Last paradox: if the fairy of electricity killed the night, she gave birth to a magical couple: the city and its night. Without light there isn't urban nightlife. And what a show, a spectacle, it is!

## **A DEBATE TO BE INITIATED**

In face of the explosion of social times and generalized social acceleration, urban nightlife is surely the last terrain wherein we may enunciate, 'we', 'making the city, society or nation'. In the incessant to and fro between individualization and socialization, me and us, the night still allows for resynchronizations. She continues to be a possible moment of pause, for the encounter and discovery of the other. We can take refuge in the night, resist and question anew our capacity of living together. In this temporarily autonomous zone, we can still define a moment of standstill and think together. Field of tensions and creation with the capacity of re-enchanting our cities and our lives. Faced with the promise of a 'commercialized' night, the questions of security and the temptations of a city which doesn't sleep, we can propose a night both responsive and pacific. It is a question of sustainable development for welcoming cities, both for their nights or for their days. The night - and time in general - is one of the questions pertaining to public policy and whose responsibility is totally transversal to society as a whole. It is an opportunity. Do we want to both maintain our traditional rhythms and allow ourselves to be in a society which doesn't sleep, as a synonym of comfort for some, of hell for others? Without public debate and without conciliation, we risk creating new tensions, reinforcing inequalities among those who take advantage of urban nightlife and the others obliged to work in order to keep the city going. Hiding these questions or allotting them to the private sphere, we allow the market economy to enforce its laws on the less socially favored, bearing in so doing the risk of seeing a set of isolated decisions spark off new conflicts and inequalities.

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*questions* (ed.), 2005, Aube et *Nuits d'Europe, Pour des villes accessibles et hospitalières*, UTBM, 2007.

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