

HOPES AND UNCERTAINTIES IN THE NIGHTLIFE INDUSTRY OF POST-COVID-19 EUROPE

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ABSTRACT – From the 1990s until the pre-COVID-19 outbreak, commercial nightlife has become central to the urban branding, and tourism marketing strategies of many European cities. However, the night-time leisure industry has stalled in Europe as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented lock-down and physical distancing measures imposed by several national governments. This short paper aims to picture the uncertain scenario that the nightlife industry of Europe, and Portugal, might have to face in post-pandemic times.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19; nightlife; lockdown; Portugal; Europe.

RESUMO – ESPERANÇAS E INCERTEZAS NA INDÚSTRIA DA VIDA NOTURNA DA EUROPA PÓS-COVID-19. Desde a década de 1990 até ao primeiro surto de COVID-19, a vida noturna tornou-se central no *branding* urbano e nas estratégias de promoção do turismo de inúmeras cidades europeias. No entanto, a indústria do lazer nocturno estagnou na Europa como consequência da pandemia de COVID-19 e das medidas de confinamento e distanciamento físico sem precedentes impostas por vários governos nacionais. Este breve artigo pretende explorar o cenário incerto que a indústria da vida noturna na Europa, e em Portugal, enfrenta nos próximos tempos pós-pandemia.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19; vida noturna; confinamento; Portugal; Europa.

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I. GAME OVER OR INSERT COIN

For many night lovers the unprecedented lock-down imposed by several national governments to avoid the spread of the new COVID-19 vírus, means the loss of the night as a time-space out of the ordinary everyday life to have fun with friends, meet new people, dance, discover new music, and feel the experience of an extraordinary instant connection, even incredibly intimate, in a space full of strangers. In our research work developed along these past ten years, we have found that, for night lovers, the transgression usually associated with “the night” appears not only as a mechanism of hedonistic amusement but also of evasion of daily life, which, for many people, is marked by growing precarity, extreme fragility, and distressing uncertainty. A shaken-not-stirred cocktail of Foucault, Bakhtin, and Baudrillard brings us to this complex world of “the night” – dancing or not dancing – as a simulated evasion of everyday life characterized by oppression and repression (especially class-based, feminized and racialized), in which a thick fog prevents us to glimpse our individual and collective horizons. In view of this, many night lovers opt to escape, imagine, and dream “the night” as a time-space of resistance and self-/collective affirmation. Therefore, it should not surprise us that, under these lock-down and confinement times, many DJs, promoters, and night lovers in general, have reacted quickly by streaming their initiatives (music sessions, domestic parties, talks, etc.) at their homes, garages or even from empty clubs that highlight, today more than ever, the social and cultural value of nightlife. “The night” thus continues by being streamed from at homes, but loses its social and convivial character (fig. 1).

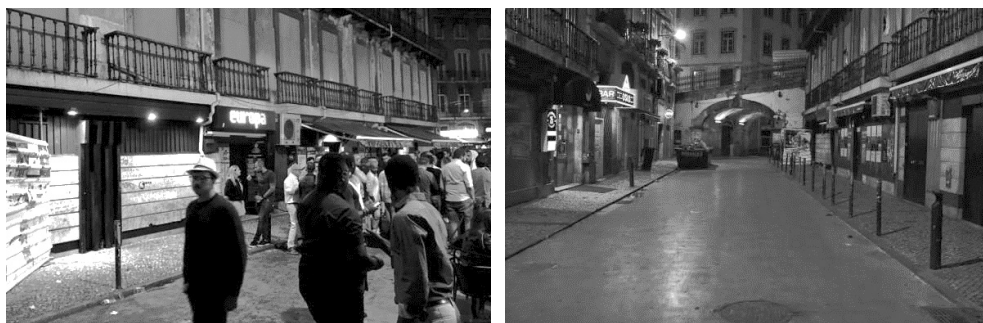


Fig. 1 – A night in Cais do Sodré (Lisbon) some months before the COVID-19 lockdown (left), and in times of confinement (right).

Fig. 1 – Uma noite no Cais do Sodré (Lisboa) alguns meses antes da COVID-19 (esquerda), e em tempos de confinamento (direita).

Source: 1st image – J. Nofre (September 2019), 2nd image – I. Sánchez Fuarros (April 2020)

The return to the so-called new normality in the *Nocturnal City* – in Rob Shaw’s (2018) terminology – raises numerous doubts and uncertainties. An increasing number of international voices from the nightlife industry –mainly from Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America – have highlighted their concerns in view of the profound

consequences that the indefinite interruption of this economic activity can have for the sector, including also related industries and activities (beverage companies, DJs, artistic performers, etc.). With the progressive disappearance of thousands of jobs, and the subsequent financial imbalance in the sector, the definitive closure of an important number of restaurants, bars, clubs, and discotheques seems a very likely scenario. Moreover, the establishment of physical distancing and the conversion of people's biological condition into a biopolitical device for social control – and, therefore, into a new factor for the production and reproduction of new segregationist policies between the healthy bodies and the sick ones – in Michel Foucault's (1975) terminology – pose a challenge of unprecedented magnitude for the nighttime leisure industry, not only in Europe but far beyond. In turn, the drastic limitation of the capacity of bars, restaurants, clubs, and discotheques, as well as the adoption of (new) hygienic measures, will produce extraordinary tensions in the businesses' accounting, with special impact on small-sized venues that usually do not count with the support of investment funds or business groups. In turn, and much more importantly, the limited number of either local or national cultural policies recognizing and promoting nightlife as an integral part of the country's cultural sector explain the resignation of the different stakeholders of the urban night in the face of a post-pandemic scenario marked by uncertainty and precariousness.

At the time of writing, there is little room for hope or optimism. A recent study by Exceed Consulting about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the nighttime of France, Spain, and Italy, reveals that up to 56.58% of the staff of nightlife-related businesses (including bars, restaurants, and night-clubs) has been fired or is on layoff. Moreover, 30.26% of businesses report that their staff has been reduced at minimum. In fact, 68.72% of the owners state that they can no longer remain closed, and 5.58% have already failed for bankruptcy (Xceed, 2020). But despite the critical situation of the nightlife industry across Europe, some recovery initiatives have already been launched both at local and national levels. In late April, the city of Vilnius (Lithuania) “turned into a giant open-air café. Restaurants, bars, and cafés were allowed to set up tables outside by strictly respecting social distancing rules” (Henley, 2020). As Mayor of Vilnius Remigijus Šimašius stated, “Plazas, squares, streets – nearby cafes will be allowed to set up outdoor tables free of charge this season and thus conduct their activities during quarantine (...) to help cafés to open up, work, retain jobs and keep Vilnius alive” (Henley, 2020). This kind of initiative has been welcomed also by the UK hospitality industry, which has recently launched a campaign to safely re-start the UK hospitality industry by transforming public spaces and streets into *al fresco* dining spaces whilst adhering to physical distancing (Lutrario, 2020). In this sense, a coalition of the most representative business on hospitality and food and beverages in the UK claims that

“(...) seating on pavements and streets outside of restaurants and bars [should] be permitted and is calling on the government to issue a directive to local authorities to allow tables and chairs outside existing hospitality businesses. The proposal also requests that no fees be charged, liquor license and zoning regulations amended until September and selected streets and open spaces become designated pedestrianised zones.” (UKGSOC, 2020).

In fact, the recovery of the nightlife industry is primordial for the re-activation of the social and cultural life of many European cities, such as Berlin, Barcelona, London, Paris, Amsterdam, or Lisbon, among dozens of others. Facing such a challenge, the nighttime.org – a platform advising and supporting night mayors, nightlife industry stakeholders and participants working toward more sustainable, resilient, and people-centered cities at night – is developing a global nighttime recovery plan that aims at supporting cities working to sustain local nighttime businesses, after-dark industries, workers, and cultural scenes in the face of the current coronavirus crisis. To do that, *nighttime.org* has recently launched a transnational web survey targeted to nightlife-related owners, managers, workers promoters, patrons in order to preliminary assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, not only in European cities but also overseas.

In the case of Portugal, the authors of this text in partnership with *nighttime.org*, are conducting a similar web survey that intends to identify, examine and assess (both quantitatively and qualitatively) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in the nightlife industry of Lisbon and Porto. The study is subdivided into different sections, targeting different night actors: independent workers and employees; artists, freelancers and promoters; event organizers, businessmen, and managers of nighttime leisure spaces; and visitors to these environments. For more details on this web survey, please see www.lxnights.pt. In fact, the assessment of the impacts of the current pandemic on the nightlife industry of both Portuguese cities appears as a fundamental part of their tourism recovery strategy, especially in the case of Lisbon where nightlife is central for its tourism and hospitality industry (e.g. Almeida, Fumega, & Alves, 2011). This study is meant to be fundamental, not only to publicly recognize the importance of the nightlife in the social and cultural life of both cities, but also to identify the most critical aspects for a future national recovery plan for the nightlife industry of Portugal. Indeed, the identification of the aspects that more negatively affects the continuity of the businesses after lock-down would also allow to better design and efficiently implement a national public funding scheme that would aim supporting the reactivation of this economic subsector.

II. DECODING THE SUBTEXTUALITY OF AN OXYMORON

The new post-COVID world poses enormous challenges for the night-time leisure industry at local, national and global levels. The closure of night venues has demonstrated how central nightlife is to the social and cultural life and wellbeing of European society (Laughey, 2006; Haslam, 2015). But, beside the various initiatives to draw a recovery plan for the nightlife industry at national and international level, we strongly believe that the current circumstances constitute a turning point for the development of the nightlife industry in the contemporary world. This moment should be used to promote nightlife as a time-space mechanism, as a source of social and emotional wellbeing as well as a tool for inclusion and community building. Moreover, the enormous socioeconomic (but still

uncharted) impacts related to the COVID-19 crisis are added to the psychological and emotional impacts on individuals, especially among the hundreds of thousands of people who still live under poverty conditions. The “night” in all its possible configurations – formal and informal, institutional and non-institutional-, and all the extraordinary networks of individual and collective meanings it promotes, can constitute an efficient mechanism for socio-emotional well-being and mutual support within our communities after a period of prolonged confinement. Moreover, it could contribute to contesting the reproduction of an ecology of (embodied) fear into nightlife as well as minimize the emotional and psychological effects of social isolation, confinement, interpersonal (not social) distancing.

Unfortunately, the official narratives and plans to adapt to the so-called “new normality” at European, national and local levels criminalize “the night”. Nightlife amenities such as bars, music venues and discotheques are perceived (still) as extremely dangerous in sanitary terms, as opposed to other semi-public spaces that have remained opened during the lockdown are prone to spread the virus. This would be anecdotal if it were not for the fact that the nightlife industry has been neglected in the specific tourism and hospitality recovery plans in most European countries, Portugal included, even when this industry has been a major contributor to the country’s economic development after the Great Recession (2008-2014). The future of the night time economy is thus uncertain. The first (possible) scenario draws on the hypothetical extinction of the nightlife as we have known it, and the complete erasure of the boundaries between labor, home and leisure spaces in the post-pandemic (digital) city. A second scenario points out to the emergence of an informal and parallel nightlife based on clandestine or illegal parties, which would take place in private and public spaces alike. If this hypothesis is confirmed, the proliferation of raves and botellon gatherings, amid other alternative forms of night socialization, might trigger the enforcement of police control and a review on the public gathering policies and the right to the city.

Nightlife has been the nuclear nexus for the division between home, labor and leisure in our contemporary societies. Under the current circumstances marked by the COVID-19 outbreak, we should not sacrifice it for the sake of a promise of potential immunity to the coronavirus that has turned our lives upside down. In fact, we should advocate for a truly egalitarian, inclusive and safe nightlife that could work as an antidote against the efforts to enforce, under the current state of exception, coercive measures to control movements and bodies. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has already warned us about the dangers of (post) pandemic politics based on the bio-militarization of the body in which individuals “must survive under conditions of perpetual control and surveillance, [are] subject to the constant material and symbolic violence enacted by the state, and live in constant fear of being arrested or incarcerated” (Mohanty, 2011, p. 78). In this sense, we firmly believe that an egalitarian, inclusive, and safe nightlife can be a catalyst for the emergence of new and creative forms of individual and collective resistance, activating new spaces for hybridization where synergies between the old and the new, the possible and the impossible, the material and the sensible, could be enacted.

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