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Night Studies Thinking across Disciplines

In July 2020, Montreal, where I live, named its first commissioner of noise and night. The “noise” portion of this title signalled the extent to which controversies over sonic nuisance had become ever more frequent in Montreal, as in so many other cities. The most interesting aspect of this appointment, however, was the reference to “night.” With the creation of this position in municipal government, Montreal joined over 50 other cities around the world that, since 2012, have appointed or elected night mayors, night czars, night ambassadors, or nighttime development officers.¹ In September 2020, Montreal’s new commissioner of noise and night would host the city’s first-ever summit devoted to the question of how Montreal should imagine, plan, and administer its nights.

July was also the month in which academic researchers based in Lisbon, Portugal, held the world’s first International Conference on Night Studies. In the original plan for the event, daytime presentations by scholars from a wide variety of disciplines were to be followed by nocturnal explorations of Lisbon’s nighttime culture. The COVID pandemic made this impossible, of course, and so the conference was moved online, with three days of Zoom sessions, later posted to YouTube.² The title of this event confirmed what had become clear to many of us over the previous decade: a new, loosely interdisciplinary field called “night studies” had solidified into a recognizable network of researchers.

In a set of parallel developments, then, scholars across several fields have turned their attention to the urban night, while city administrations have been moved to reflect upon what is now called “nighttime governance.”

The night has always been with us, of course. It has been studied by criminologists, astronomers, sociologists, an-

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thropologists, and scholars of art and literature from the very beginning of each of these disciplines or fields. If we speak only now of something called “night studies,” this is the result, I would suggest, of three factors. One, quite simply, is an observable increase in the number of books, journal issues, conferences, and research projects devoted to the night. July’s International Conference on Night Studies was one of at least five scholarly events with a night focus planned for the spring and summer of 2020. The same period saw a steady stream of special issues of academic journals devoted to the night.

A second factor is the growing self-awareness, on the part of those who study the night, of being part of an emerging field in which people across several disciplines read each other’s work and make reference to it. To engage with the night as a scholar of cinema or literature, for example, now means one is likely to read work by geographers on the temporal dimensions of cities, or by historians on the emergence of the technologies of electricity and illumination invoked in the atmospheric dimensions of fictional texts.

And, finally, scholarly interest in the night finds echoes in the move of city administrations around the world to treat the night as a significant focus of municipal governance. As cities promote the organization of all-night arts events (like *nuits blanches*) or museum nights, those who study the visual arts or museum exhibition are drawn to thinking about how a nighttime context for culture might redefine its audiences, atmospheres, and expressive forms.

In the slow emergence of something called “night studies,” we find important groundwork laid by two disciplines, economics and geography. For a half-century or more, economists have spoken of something called a “nighttime economy.” The term, it has been suggested, first emerged in the late 1960s in the United Kingdom in reference to geographical studies of small English towns where the absence of nighttime economic activity was deemed a problem. By the 1980s and 1990s, advocates of municipal government support for culture in cities were brandishing the term as a way of drawing attention to the economic contribution made by nighttime entertainment industries to the prosperity of cities.

The very notion of a nighttime economy was intended to overturn two sets of prejudices. One was a deeply-rooted conviction that said that, in the life of cities, economic production happened during the day, while the night was merely the time of consumption. Consumption, spending

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money on nighttime entertainment, for example, is itself an economic activity, but it was not usually considered central to how cities produced wealth. The other prejudice slowing acceptance of the idea of a “nighttime economy” was the belief that the economy of the night was rooted principally in informal, even illegal, kinds of commerce, such as the sale of alcohol or various kinds of vice. These things were more likely to be seen as problems for cities, to be controlled and regulated, than as resources to be protected and encouraged. This economic activity was, in any case, difficult to measure.

Since the 1990s, we can distinguish three phases in the development of thinking about nighttime economies. In the first, the challenge was simply to measure economic activity. Various cities, from London to Montreal, have attempted to aggregate nighttime economic activity using data from the leisure and entertainment industries, or by breaking down tourism revenues distinguishing those that might reasonably be allocated to nighttime consumption. This work continues in data-collecting initiatives like that of the UK Live Music Census. This study, conducted in 2017, sought to measure the “cultural and economic value” of live music, a phenomenon associated principally with the night.³

In a second phase, city administrations, often in collaboration with academics, took up the challenge of stimulating and developing a nighttime economy. The key to doing so, it was felt, was through activities in which culture was central. In the early 2000s, the spread of nighttime arts festivals, bookstore nights, museum nights, and night markets were intended to expand the public availability of cultural activities—however loosely defined—into the night. This was often rooted in the desire to encourage city-dwellers to visit or linger in those parts of cities that were typically vacated once the normal workday had ended.

In a third phase, in the face of gentrification and other forces shaping cities over the last decade or more, the question has shifted. For many in the cultural sectors, the key

question is no longer how cities might build a nighttime economy. Rather, it is how cities might protect nighttime cultural activity in the face of rising rents for cultural venues, or opposition by inner-city neighborhood residents to the loud music or street gatherings that are often one product of nighttime leisure. Even more recently, cities like Barcelona have moved to reduce the destructive forces of massive urban tourism, short-term accommodation rentals from companies like Airbnb, and an economic logic in which bars and restaurants catering to young tourists displace institutions like the family restaurant, the art gallery, or the small-scale music venue.

It is now impossible to disentangle ideas of the nighttime economy from this broader transformation of cities, in which the spread of expensive residential buildings and high-priced leisure options has had a destructive effect on the spaces and traditions of nighttime culture. The spread of night mayors and commissioners of the night in cities has been spurred by the new kinds of battles in which the urban night is involved, battles over which kind of nighttime culture will survive, and which social groups will have the means to participate in it.

Current conflicts over gentrification have produced a new politics of the night, but the current moment is hardly the first in which the night has been made political. For writers like Canadian historian Bryan Palmer, the night has long been political because it is a time in which a subversive politics may become invisible. The night is the time of the clandestine, a temporal span when illicit meetings, secret conspiracies, and furtive acts of sabotage may occur. In his book *Cultures of Darkness*, Palmer traces the revolutionary character of night back through several centuries.⁴ Elsewhere, as in the volume *Buenas Noches, American Culture*, the night is political because it is a time of refuge: it is a time when injured minorities can reflect upon the symbolic violence of the day; the night is restorative, and, in the restfulness of night, energies for political action are renewed.⁵

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This is a common way of thinking about the politics of the night: that these politics draw their strength from invisibility, from a retreat. In the past decade, however, we have seen the night made political in ways that are highly visible, even spectacular. We need only think of the series of movements of nighttime protest: the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in 2015, *Nuit Debout* in France in 2016; and then, in 2019 and early 2020, significant nocturnal political demonstrations in Beirut, Sudan, Chile, and Hong Kong. We might ask why nighttime protests in cities, often by citizens who show few other signs of political participation, have replaced the large, daytime manifestations of union and political power that we associate with the twentieth century.

The demonstrations we have been speaking of were *in the night*, but they were not mostly *about the night*. They were not usually about the safety or inclusiveness of the night, but, rather, about the larger questions of state power and political democracy. It is worth looking at those forms of political protest that have been *about the night*, that take transformations of the night as their object. One politicization of the night has taken up Henri Lefebvre's idea of the "right to the city" and expressed it more explicitly as the "right to the night."⁶ The right to the night is a key motif in the work of French sociologist Catherine Deschamps, who studies the movement of women in the night in Paris. Her work is about micro-practices that evolve in response to the sense, for women, that the night is a time of vulnerability. While this gendered experience of the night is hardly unknown, Deschamps is interested in the ways in which a knowledge of vulnerability settles into the often-unconscious habits and practices of the body.⁷

Some of the most interesting recent activism concerning the right to the night has occurred in India. The development of a high-tech industry in which women are employed in large numbers has politicized the question of these women's safety when they leave work late at night, either to go home or to go out for food and entertainment. This activism is a response both to the everyday acts of harassment these women are subject to and to a series of high-profile rapes and assaults. Movements employing the hashtag #IWillGoOut, the protests of the Blank Noise collective, and marches to "reclaim the night" in Indian cities have been vital examples of the night-focused politics of the last few years.

One way of understanding these politics of the night may be found in the work of French geographer Luc Gwiazdzin-

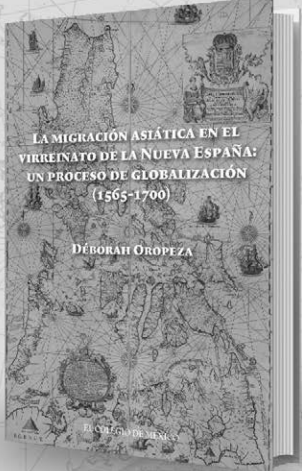
ski, and in his claim that the 24-hour cycle of societies, and of cities in particular, is marked by a discontinuous citizenship.⁸ The rights of women, of young people, of sexual or racial minorities fluctuate during the passage from day to night. At night, certain groups invite the automatic suspicion of authorities, or are barred by law and custom from occupying public space. Others, in the night, are simply reduced to their sexualities or other simple tokens of identity and treated as such. In places like nightclubs, people are subjected to quick judgements as to their worth as measured by their physical attractiveness, their age or race, or the extent to which they appear to have money.

In all these respects, the night appears to us, not simply as an interval of time, but as a space, a territory. Indeed, recent initiatives in nighttime governance, such as the appointment of night mayors, explicitly imagine the night as a region to be administered. Artists, of course, have long imagined the night in terms of dream worlds, mysterious lands,

or other entities whose character is spatial. If the night is a territory, then we must think more about the rights and responsibilities of those who are its citizens. ■■■

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Notes

- 1 For an overview of this phenomenon, see Andreina Seijas and Mirik Milan Gelders, "Governing the Night-Time City: The Rise of Night Mayors as a New Form of Urban Governance after Dark," *Urban Studies* (2020), pp. 1-19.
- 2 A video record of the event may be found at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9Gul3VdwUseJgmapWUFTA>.
- 3 UK Live Music Census, <http://uklivemusiccensus.org/>.
- 4 Bryan Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness. Night Travels in the History of Transgression* (New York: Monthly Press, 2000).
- 5 De Guzmán, María, ed., *Buenas Noches, American Culture: Latina/o Aesthetics of Night* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012).
- 6 Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (Paris : Anthropos, 2009 [1968]).
- 7 Catherine Deschamps, "Le Genre du Droit à la nuit parisienne," in Alain Montandon, Florian Guérin, and Edna Hernandez Gonzalez, eds.
- 8 Luc Gwiazdzinski, *La Nuit, dernière frontière de la ville* (La Tour-d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 2005).



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