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# The Domestic Night: Transformations, Relevance, and Continuity

Nighttime is the equivalent of half of a lifetime. However, in the social imaginary, it has been subsumed by daytime and is seen almost always as a secondary category. In contrast with the day, people do not see it as part of normalcy; they think of it, rather, as the sphere of emptiness, darkness, and rest, or, to the contrary, the festive, the noisy, and also the sordid and dangerous. Probably because the representations of the night oscillate between the extremes of irrelevance and the extraordinary, its day-to-day specificity is systematically ignored.

These polarized, stereotypical representations have produced and reproduced blind spots about the social transcendence of the night, which is why it has only very recently been recognized as a temporal space with its own characteristics, very different from those of the day. It is thanks to these explorations that it has been possible to recognize how both legitimate and illegitimate nocturnal activities and bodies have been created: for example, who can do what, where, and when, depending on the social space he/she/they occupy in the world. As a result, demands have arisen, among others, for the right to the nighttime city, women's right to recognize themselves in the public space when the sun goes down, and to do so safely. In this intersection between academic research and social de-



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mands, interesting, fruitful work has been done about the weight of nightlife in the economic sphere and the creative and cultural industries, among other topics.<sup>1</sup>

Even given that these concerns have been gaining ground in both the practical and the academic world, one dimension continues to be ungraspable: the domestic night, or night at home. This belongs irrefutably to the category of the day-to-day, which, paradoxically, is the remaining piece that is the most laborious to clarify. What is most familiar to us is the first thing that escapes our gaze and the most difficult to figure out. My interest in studying this aspect lies in trying to analyze this fragment of life that we question the least.

The domestic night includes—but is not limited to—rest, self-care, and the care of others (the ordinary kind, like meals and hygiene, and the out-of-the-ordinary kind like celebrating special occasions). It can include work and leisure; it is the space *par excellence* where courtship is woven and intimacy shared, where one seeks out one's friends since, for most people, it is the kingdom of free time.

A historical look at the domestic night can show how even what we conceive of as biological processes, like sleeping, are actually social acts that have morphed down through time until they have produced the domestic night that we know today. In that sense, I describe the contemporary domestic night as a resource for exploring and forging people's most important emotional links, and I identify the sexual division of labor that is the basis for the creation and the maintenance of the rituals that nourish those links.

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## The Night that Has Not Always Been

By definition, the night is the period of darkness between sundown and sunup. This fact is the only thing static about it. Its practices, meaning, representations, legitimate uses and users, its objects, the nocturnal repertoire of people, and even the technology that molds it change from one culture to another and over time. All in all, these peculiarities seem invisible in the face of the inertia of everyday living. They have probably been ignored because they seem irrelevant. Historically, people have assumed that everything that happens at night (magical thinking in general; the socialization that fosters intimacy; rest and sexual encounters; recreational activities; and the emotional states they generate) has no consequences on daily life.

In addition to the night/day binary, most of the night in almost all cultures and eras has been dedicated to rest, and sleep is thought to be a biological process, whose characteristics are determined by *Nature*. This naturalization of sleep has prevented it from being researched historically; most hypotheses are based on present-day assumptions using a medical perspective. Advice and products for sleeping have colonized popular culture and affirm that sleep patterns obey a biological mandate, that they have always been as they are because it is a *natural* event, when recent discoveries have revealed that the current scheme of uninterrupted sleep has existed for only two centuries.

In an exhaustive review of texts mentioning the night dating between the years 1300 and 1800, scholars have found abundant references to two stages of sleep: the first lasted about four hours, followed by a period of wakefulness of about two hours called “nocturnal resurrection,” followed by a second period of sleep of about four more hours before waking in the morning. The period of wakefulness in the middle was used to visit neighbors, have sex, or reflect on people’s dreams. In times when territories had not been pacified, neighboring households organized to sleep together in a large common area while the men took turns standing guard.

Little by little, the domestic night began to be the stage for different social activities. In the seventeenth century, the beds of the aristocracy served as the place for births, marriages, and deaths. They were semi-public, where people who were not necessarily intimates but with whom one had some kind of social commitment were enter-

tained. Nocturnal space served to socialize and promote social links.

With the proliferation of different kinds of artificial illumination, nocturnal life was revolutionized the world over. In the United States, homes that could afford the cost of interior lighting began to experience domestic night based on two essential but separate activities: rest and sociability. Rest began to demand rooms exclusively for that purpose: dark, private, and quiet. And the two-part sleep cycle was abandoned: we became creatures of a single sleep cycle, which also took place in private with only people from the closest family circle or alone. Nocturnal domestic sociability began to require specific objects to be able to gratify guests; items like candles, tables, tablecloths, chairs, and cutlery became popular. The quality of the objects depended on the finances of each family, but the custom of stimulating social ties through celebrations, rituals, and festive routines permeated all social classes in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

This complex transition gave rise to the domestic night dominant in urban North America today. I must emphasize that, regardless of the specific activities that have been carried out in domestic night down through history, we must emphasize their social function. The relevant aspect for my approach is not only what is done, but what its aim is. At the center of nocturnal domestic sociability, we find the creation, maintenance, and reinforcement of emotional ties.

## Our Domestic Night

Contemporary homes are configured in ways that were not possible in the past: households with fewer or no children, those headed by women, those consisting of romantic partners, or roommates without any romantic or blood ties have necessarily changed the urban domestic night. In addition, life stories are now segmented into different stages; people accept that childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age are different moments in life with unique characteristics. And it is precisely in the nocturnal domestic space where the rituals associated to the transitions between the stages are most frequently put into action.<sup>3</sup>

For children and teens, spending the night in someone else’s house gives them a glimpse of other ways of living, revealing the powerful truth that not everyone lives like

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they do. They experience different ways of eating and sleeping; they adjust their behavior to different rules; and they discover other ways of being and doing. Equally important is the stage in which, through the domestic night, people try out different ways of being an adult and deciding about what and how to do things where they live. The most powerful emotional experiences that young adults associate with becoming functional adults are linked with the purchase of objects that allow them to host evenings of entertainment for their friends. The variety of objects and services involved in contemporary nocturnal leisure goes far beyond what is needed to set the table; now they include television sets, sound equipment, and subscriptions to streaming services, among other items. Finally, the ritual of transition that marks a new stage in life the most is the moment in which they become the hosts of a family celebration.

Like any other kind of social link, the family that people decide to form requires rituals, living together, and memories to bind the relationships in the long term. This means that family celebrations, ranging from birthday parties to religious festivities or intimate commemorations, are highly symbolically charged. The repetition of these family rituals implicitly brings with it the responsibility of creating happy memories, reinforcing the group identity, and serving as anchors to identity. This work, like most domestic issues, has been delegated to women.

While parity in housework and child-raising has become a priority among young couples, the work needed so that leisure and celebrations can happen has not been recognized as such. Leisure work is disguised as devotion and dedication. Although successfully organizing festive domestic rituals does produce satisfaction, it also involves an enormous amount of both physical and emotional work. Feminist researchers have initiated a line of research until now only minimally explored about leisure and women.

They have managed to identify gendered and class-based inter-generational mechanisms of transmitting knowledge about domestic leisure. Not only is adulthood practiced; so is femininity.

These rituals are reproduced because they are one more of the complex contemporary manifestations of self-care and care of others. Solidarity, friends, and romances are not only woven in routine, but in rituals, specifically those that happen at home, at night. The festive in the domestic night stimulates closeness and provides the links with the solidarity needed for people to deal with life together, in each other's company.

Situating the domestic night at the center of reflections both about the social sciences and daily life allows us to recognize, make visual, propose, act, and practice more equitable domestic arrangements. Those new arrangements would allow for a better distribution of the work needed for nocturnal domestic leisure, which in turn generates the spaces necessary for happiness and solidarity. ■■

## Further Reading

- Ekirch, A. Roger, *At Days's Close. Night in Times Past* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005).
- Green, Eileen, Sandra Hebron, and Diana Woodward, *Women's Leisure, What Leisure?* (London: Palgrave, 1990).
- Harrington, Maureen, Don Dawson, and Pat Bolla, "Objective and Subjective Constraints on Women's Enjoyment of Leisure," *Society and Leisure* vol. 15, no. 1 (1992), pp. 203-221.

## Notes

- 1 The CISAN is host to the first permanent seminar on night studies in a Mexican research center. It is coordinated by Dr. Alejandro Mercado (CISAN), Dr. Michaël Spanu (CISAN), Dr. Edna Hernández (IDA-Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Brest), and Dr. Will Straw (McGill University). Most of the research about the night in North America has been socialized in this seminar, which covers, but is not limited to, the examples I mention in this article.
- 2 This process happened in stages; the cities began to have artificial lighting, hastening the disappearance of sleep in stages. The rituals of domestic sociability also became more sophisticated first in cities and in the most opulent homes. Historians agree that both models of sleeping and sociability coexisted for a period of up to two centuries.
- 3 These ideas come from the fieldwork I did for my doctoral thesis, "Emociones y desigualdades en el ocio urbano nocturno" (Emotions and Inequalities in Nighttime Urban Leisure).