

# What is nocturnal about night studies? Insights from Turin, Italy

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## ABSTRACT

The relation between the urban diurnal and the urban nocturnal has been famously conceptualized with the metaphor of the *night as frontier*. Originally proposed by Murray Melbin in 1978, the phrase suggests that the nocturnal has been gradually colonized by the capitalist logics of the day. This article contributes to provincializing night studies by postulating a nonlinear and non-dichotomous relation between the urban diurnal and nocturnal. Specifically, the article adopts the philosophical perspective of the *constitutive outside*, as articulated in a recent strand of contemporary urban studies, exploring the paradoxical and even contradictory generative tensions shaping the meanings, materialities and politics of the urban night. This theoretical posture is explored through the case of Turin, Italy, a city that has developed a complex tension between the diurnal and the nocturnal which cannot be interpreted simply from a dichotomistic perspective, as the metaphor of the urban frontier suggests.

## 1. Introduction

In his influential publications, Melbin (1978, 1987) portrayed the night of Western cities as a frontier conquered by daytime capitalism (Koslofsky, 2011). The colonization of the night began in modern times, thanks in particular to the spread of urban lighting systems (Schivelbusch, 1988), and it picked up speed with the institutionalization of the so-called night-time economy since the 1990s (Gwiazdzinski, 2005). Melbin's work implicitly conceptualized the night as the "other" of the day, assuming the day to be the time for work and public life, and the night as residual and dark, "naturally" given over to rest and transgression. In addition, the colonial and frontier metaphors suggest that the alterity of the nocturnal has been increasingly eroded to maximize round-the-clock profit and control.

The idea of a dichotomistic opposition between the diurnal and the nocturnal, as in a zero-sum conflict, has been challenged by scholars such as Edensor (2015) and Shaw (2018), who present a more nuanced and variegated scenario where the nocturnal is not just the opposite of the diurnal, but a distinctive generative spacetime with its own atmospheres, aesthetics, sociabilities, and politics. We follow this line of debate by framing the tension between the diurnal and the nocturnal in terms of the concept of "constitutive outside," as used by Ananya Roy (2016); indeed, our title echoes her "What is urban about critical urban theory?" This paper thus explores the constitutive tensions between the

diurnal and the nocturnal by questioning whether there is any *outside* to the urban diurnal, given the steady expansion of the diurnal logics suggested by the metaphor of the night as frontier. Through the concept of the constitutive outside, we scrutinize the complex, nonlinear and paradoxical processes shaping the materialities, meanings and politics at the basis of the contemporary urban night. In line with the provocative stances adopted by Ananya Roy (2016) and other critical scholars (Sheppard et al., 2013; Jazeel, 2018), our aim is to contribute to "provincializing" nocturnal perspectives in night studies, which means decentering conventional dichotomistic frameworks to reveal unexplored critical tensions and fuel further thought on the variety of urban nights.

We pursue this goal by examining the case of Turin, Italy. This mid-size city developed a meaningful nightlife after the Fordist crisis of the 1980s, as it sought to adapt to the dictates of the cultural and creative economy in the following decades (Vanolo, 2015a,b). Since the 2010s, local administrators have responded to the night-time economy's expansion with a securitarian escalation that significantly reduced its offerings (Petrilli & Biagi, 2024). Still, it would be limiting to read what happened in Turin only through the lens of nocturnal colonization: the nocturnal and the diurnal are imbricated with more nuanced relations and constitutive tensions as a multitude of different and conflictual urban nocturnalities emerge.

The article is organized as follows. The next section introduces the

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concept of constitutive outside and summarizes its use in urban studies, followed by a review of the literature on the urban night. We then turn to the Turin night, first by presenting a short history of the local evening and night-time economy, second by exploring local politics, and lastly by widening our scope to consider urban nightlife beyond typical recreational activities. The article then brings together these heterogeneous perspectives and issues by questioning the meaning of the urban nocturnal in social, cultural, and political terms. The concluding section addresses the need not just to challenge binary visions of the nocturnal and the diurnal, as is frequently done when criticizing the metaphor of the colonization of the night, but to embrace deeper (darker) nocturnal perspectives—what we call the “nocturnal gaze”—that help provincialize urban night studies by exploring the possibilities and generative tensions between and within the diurnal and the nocturnal.

## 2. The “constitutive outside” in urban studies

The idea of the “constitutive outside” originates in Derridean studies, particularly in [Staten’s \(1984\)](#) and [Laclau and Mouffe’s \(1985\)](#) work. The core idea, which must be framed in relation to the philosophy of deconstruction and to Derrida’s critique of binaries, is that concepts and phenomena are not stable and self-contained, but depend on their “outsides,” which are in turn necessary for the insides to exist. This conceptualization differs slightly from approaches to dialectical negation or constitutive othering, characteristic of post-colonial perspectives which emphasize the subaltern or peripheral role of the other and the power relations at the basis of the processes of othering (for a critical review in human geography see [Paasi, 2021](#)). Without denying the importance of those perspectives, the idea of the constitutive outside rests on its being conceptually necessary, and the dynamic condition of possibility emerging from the tensions between the inside and the outside. According to [Mouffe \(2000\)](#), in fact, a true outside is not just “external,” but must be both incommensurable with the inside and the latter’s condition of emergence. This outside calls into question the concreteness of the inside: by showing the radical undecidability of the constitutive tension, the outside makes its positivity a function of the symbol of something exceeding it.

The concept of the constitutive outside has been fruitfully applied to both the outside of urbanity ([Brenner, 2014](#); [Roy, 2016](#); [Vanolo, 2019](#)) and the outside of critical urban studies ([Conroy, 2024](#); [Jazeel, 2018](#); [Leitner & Sheppard, 2016](#)), with [Roy \(2016\)](#) borrowing [Fraser’s \(1985\)](#) provocative “What’s critical about critical theory?” to ask: “What is urban about critical urban theory?” Specifically, planetary urbanization’s core idea that “[t]here is in short no longer any *outside* to the urban world” ([Brenner & Schmid, 2014](#), p. 750) can generate an urban theory “without an outside” which reifies the city, the urban, and urbanization as objects and processes of analysis through a kind of “methodological urbanization” which reduces the entire planet to an urban analytical gaze ([Jazeel, 2018](#)). In line with this framework, scholars such as [Sheppard et al. \(2013\)](#), [Roy \(2016\)](#) and [Jazeel \(2018\)](#) have stressed the need to provincialize—which means decentering and destabilizing—conventional understandings of urbanization and urban studies, for example by recognizing that the city is just one result of urbanization processes and that urbanization might be considered just one among many processes involved in socio-spatial dialectics, some known and some not (yet) known to urban theorists.

In this article, we apply this theoretical posture to the field of night studies. In doing so, we ask, what theoretical insights can be gained by moving beyond the colonization metaphor, and by framing the nocturnal in a dynamic relation of constitutive tension with the diurnal, and vice versa? Is it possible to destabilize conventional understandings of the nocturnal as the negative other of the diurnal, exploring other ways in which the two are intertwined?

## 3. The urban night: an overview

Sociologists, geographers, anthropologists, and historians have long focused almost exclusively on daytime activities, implicitly assuming the night to be an *empty outside*, overlooking the nocturnal dimension of society ([Shaw, 2018](#); [van Liempt et al., 2015](#)). A turning point came when a few historians, such as [Melbin \(1978, 1987\)](#) and [Schivelbusch \(1988\)](#), explored the connections between modernity, industrialization, and capitalist expansion in (Western) urban nights; notably, the spread of electricity and street lighting increased surveillance, control measures, and other typically diurnal activities such as factory work. In this interpretative framework, [Melbin \(1978, 1987\)](#) introduced the well-known metaphor of the night as a frontier, colonized by daytime capitalism to increase round-the-clock profit and control ([Koslofsky, 2011](#)).

This process accelerated during the 1990s with the rise of the so-called night-time economy ([Gwiadzdinski, 2005](#); [Roberts & Eldridge, 2009](#)). A vast literature analyzed how, against the backdrop of English cities’ steady deindustrialization, local governments have developed neoliberal-inspired policies, taking “the opportunity of ‘doubling’ the city’s economy” ([Bianchini, 1995](#), p. 124) while achieving urban regeneration through nocturnal entertainment ([Chatterton & Hollands, 2002](#); [Roberts, 2024](#); [van Liempt et al., 2015](#)).

The urban studies literature has often described how such initiatives tend to reinforce the nocturnal divide between city centers and urban peripheries as well as various forms of social differentiation, exploitation, and exclusion connected to urban entrepreneurialism, boosterism, and commodification of the urban night ([Acuto et al., 2021](#); [Hadfield, 2015](#)). Initially, night studies concentrated almost entirely on spaces related to forms of leisure and entertainment—such as bars, clubs, theaters, and other elements of what [Chatterton and Hollands \(2002\)](#) called “playscapes”—but with time, scholars began to explore other spaces and forms of nocturnal work and consumption, such as shopping ([Geiger, 2007](#)) or tourism and the hospitality sector ([Eldridge & Smith, 2019](#)).

The literature has also explored how the urban night has expanded with the spread of forms of control, discipline, surveillance, and normalization, as neoliberal-inspired urban policies developed to boost the night-time economy had the unintended effect of increasing social concern about public disorder and antisocial behaviors ([van Liempt et al., 2015](#)). Mention should be made of the vast literature on securitization and policing ([Wadds, 2020](#); [Yeo, 2020](#)), as well as analysis focusing on the problems and management of alcohol consumption ([Hadfield & Measham, 2015](#); [Seijas & Gelders, 2021](#)), gender and sexual inequalities ([Farina et al., 2022](#); [Schwanen et al., 2012](#)), and conflicts between residents and those living and consuming the playscape ([Aramayona & García-Sánchez, 2019](#); [Hollands et al., 2017](#)).

These and other issues have been explored in the literature on managing cities after dark. In several case studies, [Acuto et al. \(2021 and 2024\)](#), as well as [Hollands \(2023\)](#) emphasize the hegemony of neoliberal top-down models of urban night governance and the need for bottom-up approaches that may be effective in co-opting marginalized groups that are central to the urban night, such as many night workers. Night work is a major concern, as there is evidence of widespread precarity, exploitation, and racism (for example, in the cases of delivery and care workers) and the systematic exclusion from policies and debates of people working in informal sectors (e.g., sex work) despite their prominent presence in many urban nights ([Kolioulis et al., 2021](#); [MacQuarie, 2023](#); [Aramayona and Guarneros-Meza, 2023](#)).

An increasingly important strand of the night studies literature considers the urban night as a threshold that opens onto atmospheres, practices, and potential spaces of transgression and freedom ([Dunn & Edensor, 2020](#)). Unsurprisingly, the nocturnal is a common narrative trope, as in the case of urban noir movies ([Davis, 2001](#)). In cultural geography, the atmospheric qualities of the nocturnal have been analyzed, for example, in relation to different forms of mobility, such as

walking or cycling at night (Cook & Edensor, 2017; Morris, 2011), while the chapters in the collection edited by Dunn and Edensor (2024) engage with the social and cultural geographies of the nocturnal sky. Urban night and darkness are also closely connected to specific subcultures (Stahl & Bottà, 2019), emphasizing that the night is a constitutive element of specific experiences, sociabilities, groups, and cultural formations (Hollands, 2016).

This literature has also explored the multiple cultural associations of night and darkness with ideas of fear, danger, unsafety or inappropriateness, ideas that, according to Brands et al. (2015) arise out of general characteristics of human perception, but which bear political implications. As mentioned earlier, the spread of artificial lighting allowed the bourgeois to impose its visual order on the night: illuminating some places and leaving others in the darkness makes certain subjects and activities visible and “right,” but not others (Edensor, 2017). For its part, feminist literature has probed how the nocturnal city can also instill fear. Recent work analyzes not only how this broadly limits women’s access to cities at night, but also how fear and unsafety are intersectional, playing out differently in specific and situated interactions (Farina et al., 2022; Plyushteva, 2019).

Summing up, the literature on the nocturnal city is extensive and geographically variegated (Nofre & Eldrige, 2018; Nofre & Garcia Ruiz, 2023; Tomasella, 2024). However, most of this literature shows an essentialist understanding of the urban night, seen as the “other” of the urban day, as clearly expressed by the metaphor of the night as a colonized frontier. In addition to being historically inaccurate (Ekirch, 2005), this metaphor is based on a binary opposition between day and night that, although seemingly “natural,” carries specific cultural connotations, for example, day as safe and productive vs night as dangerous and unproductive (Gallan & Gibson, 2011). Shaw (2015, 2018), in his powerful critique of dichotomous understandings of the diurnal and the nocturnal, unmasked how a Eurocentric gaze universalizes the historical experience of the American Midwest and reproduces a colonial imaginary of the night as an empty and wild space on which conquerors impose their (diurnal) reason.

Shaw thus suggests moving beyond this perspective and considering how the urban night has always been caught up in diurnal economic expansion and social control processes. To do so, we take the case of Turin, a post-industrial city that has developed a complex tension with the nocturnal through processes of commercialization and securitization of its nightlife.

#### 4. Urban nights in Turin

The case of Turin is employed to explore tensions characterizing discourses and conceptualizations of the urban night. Adopting a “diurnal gaze,” Turin can be described as a North-western Italian city with a strong industrial heritage, as the home city of the automaker FIAT. With about 900,000 inhabitants (1.4 million in the wider metropolitan area), this “ordinary” mid-size Italian city began to suffer deindustrialization during the 1980s. Like many other European cities, it is currently trying to become and self-represent itself as a vibrant, creative, culturally active city and tourist destination. Stereotypical representations of nocturnal leisure and its key places (Fig. 1) figure largely in this effort (Vanolo, 2015a).

The analysis presented here is based, first, on the personal experience of the authors from their specific positionality as white adult male academics in their late 30s and late 40s. Our positionality is crucial, as it influenced our access to informal situations, discussions with night users, and our perceptions of safety. Second, the article builds on the findings of two studies, one carried out in winter 2020/21 and based on semi-structured interviews with 18 people who had been regular

customers of the city’s evening and night venues for at least 15 years<sup>1</sup>, and another conducted in 2023 and involving 12 interviews with night-goers and nocturnal workers in non-popular recreational activities. All 30 participants were selected through non-probabilistic sampling, controlling for variables such as gender, sexual orientation, education, and employment to increase sample heterogeneity.

##### 4.1. The (d)evolution of Turin’s playscape

Turin’s nightlife is unique among Italian cities, as it has been extensively discussed in the international academic literature (Crivello, 2011; Cattani & Vanolo, 2014; Bolzoni, 2016; Bottà, 2020; Beccaria et al., 2022; Bottà & Petrilli, 2023; Petrilli & Biagi, 2024). However, this section offers a new perspective, focusing specifically on the tensions between the diurnal and the nocturnal.

As was the case in many English cities, the 1990s were a turning point for Turin’s nightlife because the city awakened from what Bernelli (2003, p. 183) described as the “long sleep” of the 1980s, when the rhythms of the factory marked everyday life. According to this interpretation, before the 1990s the relation between the diurnal and the nocturnal was generally envisioned as oppositional, with a hierarchical division between the day, a time of work, and the night, an “other” time of rest (Bottà & Petrilli, 2023). This does not mean that nocturnal leisure activities did not exist, but that they were mostly regarded as residual, transgressive and marginal (Bottà, 2020), in a way that is conceptually consistent with the metaphor of the night as frontier.

During the 1990s, recreational activities mushroomed in the city, forcing a rethinking of the urban night. The nocturnal playscape was polycentric, including several clubs, ARCI<sup>2</sup> cultural venues, free parties, and squats. Turin’s nightlife was polarized around two hubs: Murazzi, a riverfront in the city center, and the Docks Dora, a former warehouse area on the outskirts. They were the first (and were to be the only) nightlife districts of the city with a meaningful concentration of venues enabling people to “hop from one club to another” (interview, Arturo), giving the city a more cosmopolitan air: “it looks like London ... so cool” (interview, Davide).

The situation began to change as the 2006 Winter Olympics approached, bringing increased normalization and institutionalization. Many squats, raves and irregular recreational activities were shut down, as well as the Docks Dora, because the area’s reputation as noisy and insecure clashed with the new image centering on ideas of urban regeneration that the city was promoting for the neighborhood. In the same years, the first evening-oriented *movida*<sup>3</sup> district came to life, the Quadrilatero Romano. Located in central areas long stigmatized as dangerous by both day and night, it quickly filled with restaurants and bars, providing a more socially acceptable and domesticated idea of leisure for “middle-class young people with cosmopolitan tastes” (Semi, 2004, p. 83).

The Olympics period is commonly described with enthusiasm, due to a myriad of night events, widely narrated as symbols of the metamorphosis of “a city that was no longer as dark as it once was” (interview, Sara) and as a key part of its new cosmopolitan imaginary: “Everybody came to Turin! There were a lot of foreigners who came here to have fun, really a lot!” (interview, Giuly). However, we can also see a twofold and contradictory transformation, which challenges the nocturnal/diurnal dichotomy. On the one hand, the temporal boundaries of the night expanded: every day of the week there was something

<sup>1</sup> The research was part of the project “What is left of the night - The securitization of Turin’s nightlife”, supported by the University of Milano-Bicocca.

<sup>2</sup> *Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana*, a left-wing non-profit cultural association.

<sup>3</sup> A Spanish-derived term that describes an urban environment where people move around bars, restaurants, and clubs, or simply stand in streets or squares while chatting and drinking.

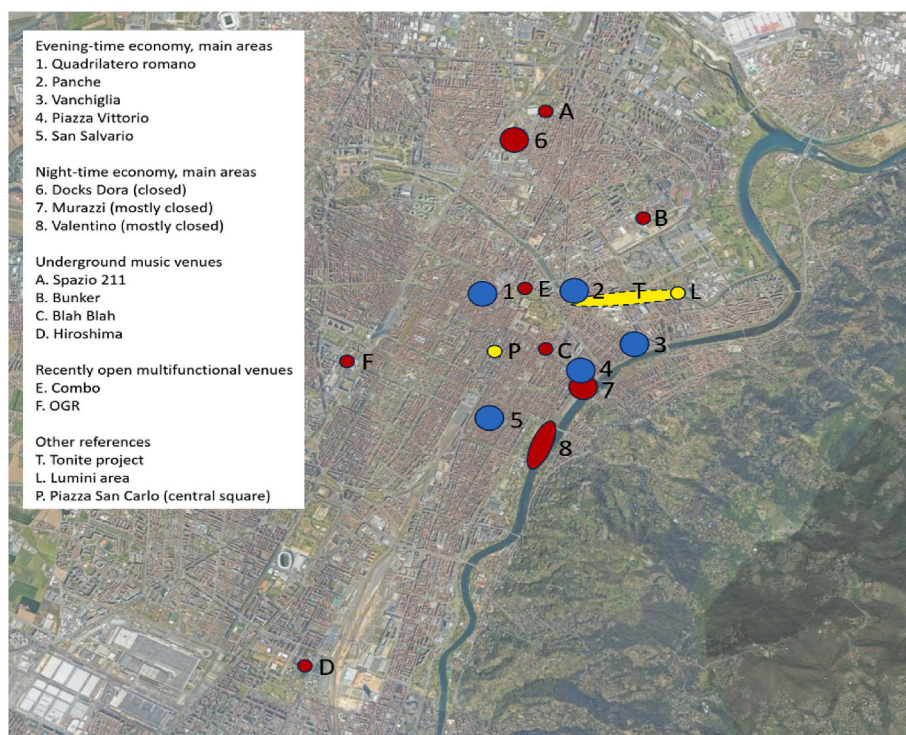


Fig. 1. Qualitative map of places mentioned.

to do until morning, and so “it felt like a night that never ended.” (interview, Barbara). On the other hand, there was an increase in normalized events, such as the “white nights” organized for the first time during the Olympic year. These events made the night increasingly ordinary and accessible to a broader, “diurnal” audience (Bottà & Petrilli, 2023). In summary, the night seemed to expand, while at the same time was becoming less and less “dark” and “out of the ordinary.”

During this decade, city managers and local stakeholders recognized the night-time economy’s potential. Clubs and venues concentrated in the city’s central area, while outlying ones gradually closed. From the spatial standpoint, the metaphor of the frontier seemed to be reversed, as nocturnal activities gravitated together, rather than spreading out. At the same time, the Murazzi clubs “became fashionable at some point” (interview, Nino), losing their originality, alterity, transgressive aura and diversification: “clubs were all becoming the same” (interview, Andrea). In other words, this area has been subsumed by the diurnal logic of assimilation, as the colonization metaphor predicts.

The geographical concentration of the diverse night populations in a few central areas brought an increase in conflict, to which the local administration responded with growing surveillance and control strategies. Emblematic examples include the closure of almost all Murazzi clubs in 2012 and the crackdown following the Piazza San Carlo tragedy<sup>4</sup> in 2017. Many nocturnal venues that did not meet formal security requirements were forced to close or were not granted the necessary permits; for instance, the number of discotheques in the Valentino Park area dropped from 6 to just 1 in a few short years. A mere handful of “underground” night-time venues (such as Hiroshima, Spazio 211, Blah and Bunker), mostly in outlying areas, survived the crackdown. These dynamics led to a perceived decrease in the quality of nightlife, and wrapped a nostalgic aura around the “authentic Turin of the 1990s” (see for example Ferraris, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> During the UEFA Champions League Final screening in Piazza San Carlo, Turin’s central square, the crowd panicked when some robbers used pepper spray, causing a stampede that resulted in three deaths and 1672 injuries.

After almost every club in Murazzi was shut down in 2012, no new nightlife district took its place. Two evening-oriented *movida* areas, San Salvario and Vanchiglia, took the leading role in the playscape: “in the last ten years, we can say that *aperitivo* [aperitif] has won over dancing, without any doubt” (interview, Clara). Night-time venues have been replaced wholesale by evening services such as restaurants, taverns, and wine and cocktail bars, in what has been called the *eveningification* of Turin’s nightlife (Petrilli & Biagi, 2024). Analyzing San Salvario, Bolzoni (2016, p. 64) describes a “colonization of the night by young Italian revellers,” with young creatives taking “symbolic control” (ibid., p. 63) of the district, at the expense of other groups such as migrants and university students. However, the colonization of this *movida* district (and of Vanchiglia) is incomplete, since it still stages forms of material resistance by young people who take control of Largo Saluzzo, one of its main squares (Petrilli & Biagi, 2024).

After the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, free and non-commercial spontaneous parties cropped up in large numbers, particularly in public parks (Famà, 2021). Through the current right-wing Meloni government has criminalized free parties (Legislative Decree 162/2022), they continue to be held in Turin, particularly in the area near the municipal cemetery (Ricci, 2024; Sonnessa, 2024). However, the cosmopolitan aura seems to have faded, as the city now attracts forms of contemporary pilgrimage only during major music festivals (particularly Kappa FuturFestival and Club 2 Club). For a few days a year, they bring Turin back to the center of the global nightlife scene, but for the rest of the time, “music and situations [are] less and less cool” (interview, Andrea). Although a few new multifunctional spaces have opened recently (OGR and Combo), they suffer the consequences of the last decade’s security escalation, offering an experience quite different from the clubs of the past, due to their early closing time, heavy surveillance measures, and low capacity.

Summarizing, the urban playscape developed nonlinearly over the last decade. On the one hand, nightlife has been tamed and normalized. Many night venues have closed or changed radically, and the nocturnal has shifted in time, with the evening-time economy now dominating the city’s playscape. By contrast, illegal parties in parks and young people

taking over squares in “eveningificated” neighborhoods testify the persistence of a desire for “dark” nocturnal vitality.

#### 4.2. The politics of urban nights

The public administration has changed its attitude toward night governance over the last 30 years, passing from a laissez-faire approach in the 1990s to a securitarian approach in the post-Olympic period. Controls over night venues have also increased the pressure on *less dark* and evening-oriented *movida* districts, which in turn have become subject to specific surveillance and control measures (Petrilli & Biagi, 2024). In this section, we will focus on how public and political debates, legal proceedings, urban plans, and redevelopment projects have shaped nightlife over the past decade.

The securitarian approach can be seen as an attempt to alleviate conflicts—particularly those concerning noise, sanitation, and trash—between residents, evening/night users and entrepreneurs. The discursive normative dimension that emerged in the public debate during the 2010s distinguishes between *movida* (educated, middle-class consumers, drinking quietly in bars) and *malamovida* (literally, bad *movida*), which generically includes undisciplined and “problematic” forms of recreation in public spaces. *Malamovida* mainly centers on the Largo Saluzzo square in San Salvario mentioned above, together with Santa Giulia square and Le Panche in Vanchiglia, all places where young people gather, chat, play and drink outside commercial venues in huge numbers until the small hours. Since the 2016 mayoral election campaign, the local political debate on issues surrounding the evening and night-time economy have chiefly focused on the problems caused by *malamovida*, with conservative political parties and other “moral entrepreneurs”—such as the *National Coordination Against Urban Decay and MalaMovida*,<sup>5</sup> chaired by a local protagonist of anti-nightlife campaigns—insisting on the need to regulate the evening and night-time economy more strictly.

A turning point was on March 1, 2021, when the Court of Turin found the municipal administration guilty of the noise problem in the San Salvario area (Albanese, 2021). The case was brought by residents complaining of excessive noise at night, and the court ruled in their favor, fining City Hall 1.2 million euros. The municipal administration responded with a *Night Governance Plan* in 2023 encompassing educational and social advertising (Fig. 2) and increased control through technologies for measuring and preventing noise. The possibility of installing visual measurement systems, which means light bars that change color according to the noise level, was discussed. Announcements aside, the measures that were in fact implemented included a noise monitoring system and real-time measurement of the number of people present in the San Salvario area, which could potentially be used to limit access.

The *Night Governance Plan* also pushes a celebratory narrative of the positive *movida*, describing it as “a major asset for making the city vibrant, lively, deeply human, capable of generating social as well as economic value, and acting as a magnet for tourists and talent.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, evening commercial activities are commonly regarded as economic assets for urban regeneration. Recently, the *ToNite* project funded by the EU’s 2019-23 Urban Innovative Actions program has sought to increase the quality of the Dora riverfront during the evening and night. The area, which is close to the city center, is mainly populated by foreign immigrants and commonly perceived as unsafe, though this is not borne out by actual data on crime rates.<sup>7</sup>

The *ToNite* project hopes to change this perception through a mix of

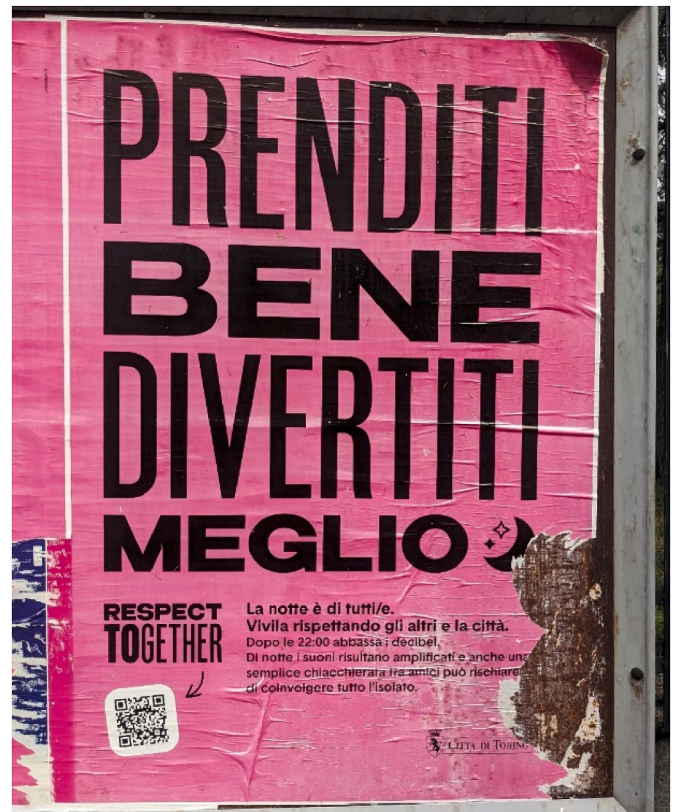


Fig. 2. A municipal poster calling for quiet after 10 p.m., 2024.

securitarian approaches, purely aspirational ideas of gentrification and regeneration, and broad-brush “diurnal” community-building initiatives. These initiatives exploit stereotypical visions of multiculturalism and romanticized ideas of the night to counteract the stigma associated with the area. The launch event *The First of a Thousand Nights*, for example, drew on an orientally-themed fantasy “with music, performances, and storytelling [bringing] a different perception of the night as a time when cities can unleash new energy and a sense of belonging.”<sup>8</sup> But what the *ToNite* project conveys most clearly is a caricatured notion that evening businesses such as cafés and restaurants must be welcomed because they bring urban development in terms of economic flows, security, and attracting “good” consumers. By contrast, other activities (“ethnic” shops and clubs) are potential sources of problems in a domino-effect, broken windows mechanism where disorder at night attracts petty crime, drug dealing, and violence.

What emerges is a politics of the urban night which, echoing Sharon Zukin (1995), can be ironically called “pacification by aperitif,” where the evening businesses are touted for their supposed potential for bringing security and regeneration. Culturally, this evokes a binary vision of the *wild dark nocturnal* versus the *domesticated light nocturnal*, represented by respectable evening venues. Racialized imaginaries overlap with this dichotomistic vision, reproducing forms of criminalization of poverty: while people spending the evening in trendy restaurants are discursively framed as agents of urban development, bringing life to the urban night, young migrants drinking or loitering in public space are framed as pollutants, enemies of security and decorum.

#### 4.3. The plurality of Turin nights

In the Eastern part of Turin, in a public park next to the city’s largest

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nodegradoemalamovida.it>. All websites mentioned in the article were last accessed on October 7, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.comune.torino.it/giunta\\_comune/intracom/htdocs/2023/2023\\_1100344.pdf](http://www.comune.torino.it/giunta_comune/intracom/htdocs/2023/2023_1100344.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://tonite.eu/>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://tonite.eu/la-prima-di-mille-notti-levento-di-lancio-di-tonite/>.

cemetery, lies an area named *lumini*, literally “small lights.” It takes its name from the fact that the candles and grave lights inside the vast cemetery can be seen from the park. The area is fairly empty during the day and the evening, but during the night it is a well-known area for male gays cruising for casual sex, which not infrequently takes place right in the park. Cruising is facilitated both by the area’s material characteristics—it is huge, dark and nearly deserted—and by its nocturnal atmosphere, which seems to suggest possibilities of “other” logics, practices, encounters, sociabilities and even identities, which are—or seem—impossible during the day.

A small bar (formally a social club) is located at the site. It used to be closed at night and frequented mainly by an older clientele. Recently, it has come under new management, who, thanks to the ToNite project, target a younger audience with a wider range of activities. During the summer, the place is now crowded with people drinking and dancing, bringing new life to the area. Still, there has been a side effect: according to our interviewees, this new vitality makes cruising difficult or even impossible. It brings too much “light” at night to the *lumini* area.

This is a story of clashing ways of living and experiencing the night. It plays with imaginaries of light and darkness, which arguably lie at the basis of the cultural idea of the nocturnal. It can be framed as another story of the colonization of the night by formal, regulated businesses, which means the expansion of the diurnal logic. Nevertheless, a few hundred meters from the bar, there is the aforementioned hotspot for illegal parties, which became popular after the Covid lockdown and have not been eradicated by the Meloni government’s anti-rave law. These parties have also narrowed the cruising area, eroding opportunities for this specific use of that nocturnal space. The clash between different understandings, experiences and spatialities of the night thus cannot be put down entirely to diurnal colonization or resistance to it. Rather, multiple nights and ways of navigating them unfold in the city.

What is happening in the *lumini* area reminds us that clubs, pubs, and bars are just part of what constitutes the urban night. Self-evident though it may be, this statement encourages us to reflect on the capitalist bias in the conventional understanding of the urban night. The fact that analysis commonly distinguishes between commercial and non-commercial spaces means that the urban is implicitly framed in economic and consumerist terms. As stressed in the literature (for example [Aramayona and Guarneros-Meza, 2023](#)), there are arguably many forms of “life” in the “nightlife” that move beyond formal spaces of consumption, and any attempt to provincialize night studies must recognize this diversity.

As we have seen, urban nightlife also unfolds in public, open spaces like parks and squares. Many people consume and work at night, bringing drinks and food and giving life to nocturnal places in different ways (see [Hadfield, 2015](#)). In the central neighborhoods of Turin, crowds of young people flock to the *malamovida* squares, generating a chaotic urban landscape. In more peripheral areas, squares, parks and other public spaces are often used by smaller groups; here, young people gather for a drink and a smoke before moving to the central *movida* districts. This use of public space is generally considered problematic in peripheral areas, either because there are few young people or because it involves an older population, generally immigrants: “they spend many hours talking on the benches [...] I can’t image my grandparents being outside at night and being so sociable” (interview, Germana; on this topic, see [Eldridge & Roberts, 2022](#)). Moreover, public spaces are often stigmatized with racialized claims of urban decay ([Di Lollo, 2020](#); [Urso, 2023](#)), as groups of young male immigrants gathering in public is commonly regarded as evidence of drug dealing, connected to the growing concerns about youth gangs, and discursively represented as a sign of urban blight ([Pavoni & D’Alba, 2024](#)).

It is also common to see people walking alone or with their dogs. Dog walking is a shared experience, which takes unique form in nocturnal hours: for example, it is easier to leave dogs free, without a leash because “to see [my dog] freely enjoying its time, it’s a joy for me too” (interview, Lucia). Dogs are allowed to develop completely different

sociabilities, and—despite Turin’s leash laws—it is easy to spot groups of dogs playing together and “colonizing” parks at night, a practice that is uncommon (and generally forbidden) during the day. More generally, it is possible to explore the life of non-human animals in the urban night, mapping presences, atmospheres, and behaviors which may differ from those of the day.

In Turin, a central role in nocturnal life is also played by small shops selling alcohol and junk food for low prices, often run by immigrants and widely known as “Bangla,” a racist term rooted in othering, and particularly in an imaginary, stereotypical association with immigrants from Bangladesh. Formally, Bangla shops are not allowed to sell alcohol during the night in certain areas. Still, the regulation is loose: “Creatures of the night like me, young and older immigrants, members of the Bangla family ... there’s quite a lot of comings and goings” (interview, Roberto).

Other crowded spaces during the late evening and night include bingo halls and betting shops; they are commonly located in outlying areas of the city and attract very diversified users: “Actually, the situation in the betting shops is a bit hardcore, but at the bingo hall it is quieter, there are old people and couples” (interview, Carlo). There are also shops and clubs catering to specific gaming subcultures, such as role-play games or videogames, and appealing more to teenagers and young adults. Lastly, there are the places making up the nocturnal sex-scapes, including indoor venues (saunas, swingers’ clubs, night clubs, located all over the city) and open spaces like *Lumini*, primarily situated on the city’s outskirts, and widely known to be connected to sex work or cruising (cf. [Hubbard & Colosi, 2015](#)).

The night is also populated by places that are very far from the logic of socialization and play. Hospital emergency rooms are crowded at night, as well as police stations, homeless shelters, taxis, public transport, 24-h tobacco shops, night study halls for students, and gas stations. They are all part of a nocturnal urban infrastructure of city life, which is in some respects still little explored or taken for granted in urban studies (see [Shaw, 2022](#)). Lastly, urban nightlife—in Turin, as in every city—unfolds in private houses and rooms, family settings, or cohousing practices where intimacy or loneliness reign: “I would never go back to living in the student house, lots of parties and fun ... but now I have to rest, at least on work days” (interview, Nicoletta).

## 5. Provincializing the urban night

This section returns to our original questions, exploring the nocturnal, its constitutive tensions with the diurnal beyond the colonization and frontier metaphors, and the provincialization of night studies. Our engagement with the plurality of Turin nights confirms that the night cannot be defined in absolute terms: confining it to the time between dusk and dawn masks the complexity of meanings, materialities, attitudes and practices. Moreover, the dichotomistic view of the day as the productive time and the night as the time of rest and unproductivity, as well as that of the day as an orderly and safe space, and the night as a liminal and transgressive space, are a rough simplification of reality: as our analysis shows, nights and evenings are crowded by different (and in some cases conflicting) activities, jobs, work, projects and investments. The nocturnal is hence clearly an inhomogeneous space-time, as the urban rhythms, atmospheres and spatialities which can be observed, for example, in a *malamovida* square at midnight are crucially different from those at an illegal party in a park at 3:00 a.m.

The frontier metaphor tends to downplay how the nocturnal unfolds in complex tangles of materialities, discourses, practices and atmospheres. On the one hand, the night may be seen as what is commonly considered and discursively reproduced as nocturnal, for example, in cultural products such as noir movies ([Davis, 2001](#)) that ascribe specific meanings (qualities and rhythmicities) to the night. But other elements are at play: for example, certain practices emerge more easily at night than during the day precisely because of the generative tensions

articulating “outside” the diurnal, as well as a “transgression” of the inside. To cite some examples, during the day in Turin, it is unlikely (although not impossible) that dogs running leashless in parks or people enjoying public sex will be seen. In another example, as the literature stresses, the forms of exploitation and struggle involved in night work can differ meaningfully from those found during the day (Kolioulis et al., 2021).

Such perspectives suggest that the diurnal lies in a tension of constitutive outside of the nocturnal, not simply because it is involved in a relation of alterity, as the frontier metaphor suggests, but because the nocturnal becomes a condition of emergence, an outside that by being inside creates what is described in deconstructive analysis as “radical undecidability,” viz., something that does not belong at either pole of a dichotomy (Bates, 2005; Roy, 2016). Put differently, without an ontologically univocal understanding of the night, the nocturnal establishes itself through complex and nonlinear relations with the diurnal, where both the diurnal and the nocturnal distinguish themselves while overlapping and hybridizing, in a tension which is not oppositional, as the binarism of the colonization metaphor maintains, but rather co-constitutive. The following three examples from our fieldwork in Turin may shed some (gloomy) light.

The first concerns the discursive construction of Turin’s nightlife (d) evolution, which is marked by a diffuse sense of nostalgia. As is widely recognized, nostalgia is a powerful force running through contemporary culture (Reynolds, 2011), and the mythologization of the nights of the past is palpable in Turin. Surprisingly, it is also found in the narratives of people who, for demographic reasons, did not experience the playscape of the 1990s and early 2000s. The argument is that the nocturnal was much more “authentic” before it was normalized by mounting commercialization and securitization: the night was darker, unregulated, out of control and transgressive. Nevertheless, our account of Turin’s playscape is far from being so linear. Nocturnal activities have continued to proliferate and diversify, generating everchanging ways of experiencing and enjoying the night, as witnessed by the material resistance of *malamovida* youth or the illegal parties held in parks. Moreover, our exploration of the plurality of Turin’s nightlife has shown that there are still “outsides” to the processes of diurnalization, such as the older and immigrant population gathering in public spaces in peripheral areas. Consequently, the romanticization and nostalgic image of the “authentic” night of the past is partial, subjective and stereotypical.

A second example concerns the dominant security-oriented approach, which clings to the idea that the most dangerous nocturnal areas in Turin—or, rather, those *perceived* as unsafe—are those which are either *full*, like the *malamovida* squares, or *empty*, like the ToNite area. Focusing on the latter, the idea of Lungo Dora’s emptiness is basically about shops, bars and “appropriate” consumers. For this reason, it has been explicitly assumed that opening new bars and restaurants, together with smart lighting systems and community-building initiatives, will bring *life* and *regeneration* to the area. At the same time, in a seemingly contradictory move, public benches were removed from the this area in 2021, claiming that they attracted drug dealers and heavy drinkers.<sup>9</sup> More practically, they were used as gathering spaces for immigrants, showing that the area was not as empty at night as it was painted.

The removal of the benches, together with the “pacification by aperitif,” confound the ostensibly linear association between darkness, absence of human presence and perceived insecurity: they are responses to the push for change in the area’s social composition, which basically means gentrification, in an endless process of displacement and redistribution of activities and presences in the urban space. Immigrants are treated as *outsiders* to “good” urban life, and their nocturnal alterity is considered problematic and forced aside. This is a process where the

metaphors of colonization and the frontier would seem to apply, though they are embedded in a different mechanism, referring basically to the expanding frontier of gentrification, as famously theorized by Neil Smith (1996).

A third example regards the gradual—but still incomplete—replacement of what we called metaphorically the *wild dark nocturnal*, by a *domesticated light nocturnal*. This process began with the “white nights” organized since the Winter Olympics, which eroded the alterity of the night in the attempt to turn the nocturnal into a time-space of consumption, security and “life.” This framing gives the diurnal positional superiority, where the nocturnal is always beneath it, whether in terms of repugnance or fascination (Gallan & Gibson, 2011), in an entire series of possible relations. In this situation, the diurnal takes control. It eliminates many traits of the nocturnal (darkness, unproductivity, recklessness), but also depends on it: symbolically, the diurnal incorporates the nocturnal, as suggested for example by the romanticized and colonial urban fantasy employed in the ToNite project’s opening event, “*The First of a Thousand Nights*.” This reveals the generative nature of the nocturnal, which is thus configured precisely as the diurnal’s *constitutive outside*, in the perspective we proposed here.

From this standpoint, diurnal and nocturnal cannot be simply equated with the central and the peripheral, with meaningful consequences for urban studies. Placing the nocturnal and the diurnal in a binary relation of othering, associating the former with the empty, the unproductive, the dark, the low and the transgressive, is compatible with the imaginaries of security and pleasure which characterize mainstream contemporary life and the vision of the 24-h city. The urban nocturnal is, rather, a liminal threshold and a constitutive other of the urban diurnal, as the annihilation and normalization of the night paradoxically generates both strategies for diurnal development and regeneration, as well as new form of nocturnal expression. Seen in this light, the constant hybridization of the nocturnal through its relations with the diurnal can also be framed as constitutive of potential fields of critique, generating spaces of “dark” imagination of alternatives to the logic, the aesthetics, and the rhythms of the diurnal.

## 6. Final thoughts: towards a critical nocturnal gaze

Far from assuming a romanticized vision of nocturnal, we have attempted to answer the question posed in the article’s title by observing how the urban night is an heterogenous space-time, partially shaped by clashing and ever-evolving social and cultural processes, making it impossible to reach an ontologically univocal understanding of the nocturnal. In discussing the case of Turin, we argued that the urban diurnal and the urban nocturnal are imbricated in a nonlinear relation which can be profitably explored through the philosophical idea of the *constitutive other*. Our analysis suggests that *darkness*, seen materially and symbolically as the primary distinguishing feature of the urban night, has been eroded by the dynamics at play in the neoliberal city. Paradoxically, expansion of consumption spaces, securitization, normalization and, more generally, the quest for the 24-h city tend to reduce certain distinctive aspects of the urban night. Still, this does not mean that the nocturnal and the diurnal can be framed straightforwardly as binary elements in a conflictual relation. Quite the opposite: as this article has shown, the diurnal and the nocturnal are bound up in complex, nonlinear and generative relations.

This article suggests that it is possible, and perhaps necessary, to provincialize our interpretations of the urban night. This is not just a call for further analysis and reflection on the plurality of experiences, meanings and contexts shaping the urban night, but also for the development of nocturnal gazes, conceptual stances that view the nocturnal from both the inside and the outside. This means, for example, not considering the night-time economy as deterministically flattened by diurnal rationality, but exploring the nocturnal interstices and interferences that are still present in commercial and recreational activities. The diurnalized night (or colonized night, to use Melbin’s lexicon)

<sup>9</sup> <https://torinocronaca.it/news/200283/gli-anziani-sono-senza-panchine-rimosse-a-causa-del-bivacco.html>.

is not strictly day, nor night: it can be framed as a constitutive outside which cannot be reduced to either element of the binarism but contains both, side by side with a variety of nocturnal practices, activities, and spaces such as those presented in the section headed *The plurality of Turin nights*.

Although the night studies literature has recognized the need to engage with the nocturnal beyond the traditional focus on the more visible aspects of the night-time economy, this article—by drawing on the concept of the constitutive other—is a call for exploring perspectives and logics that are invisible, useless or perhaps even illogical from a diurnal point of view. This means delving into the darkness, engaging with the emerging tensions of the nocturnal to develop “shady” methodologies and styles, as Pendell (1995) and Eshun (1998) did in their overlooked experiments with nocturnal-related issues such as psychoactive substances and Afrofuturism, where they pioneered new languages and modes of argumentation. Though this article is arguably anchored in “diurnal” styles and methods, we suggest that framing the nocturnal in a constitutive tension with the diurnal can be a stimulus for provincializing night studies, first of all by recognizing the plurality of intertwined relationships at the basis of discursive framings, urban conflicts and variegated experiences of the nocturnal.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors have nothing to declare.

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