THE TOPIC

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Magdalena Jarvin, Doctor in Sociology from the Paris V University

Nightlife as the transition from youth to adulthood. The case of young Swedish people

This article studies the social nightlife relations as a means to analyse the transition from youth to adulthood. The young people of Stockholm tend to go out at night quite frequently at first and, as years go by, then prefer to have dinner at home. Regarding the way they do it, the evolution seems to be similar than in other European countries. However, the Swedish case is different regarding the way the change takes place. From the conversations held we can draw the existence of an implicit norm indicating the behaviour to be progressively followed in order to join the registry of "adult" sociability. Our proposal is to interpret this trend in relation to the place assigned to the young by society. In a universal Providence State system, individuals are encouraged to become autonomous and independent from their family as quickly as possible, thus favouring regrouping and a strong identification with their peers to the detriment of an intergenerational socialisation.

Key words: construction of identities, own presentation, test oneself, group of peers, interaction, sociability, nightlife.

The sociological research of the young dealing with the process of identity construction and evolution towards adulthood hardly ever takes into consideration socialisation with friends and nightlife; however, this trend affects people aged between 20 and 30 (Desjeux *et alii.*, 1999). Considering, as Berger and Luckmann do (1996), that the construction of identity is never complete, we are based on the idea that identity can be observed through - for instance - nocturnal habits shown by young adults. This individual evolution is carried out in social interpretation through a complex game of presentation and experimentation of certain aspects of our identity (from Queiroz et Ziolkowski, 1997). The individuals we are exposed to reflect these features like a mirror (Strauss, 1992) and thus allow us to discover our image in their opinion. This perpetual movement, this exchange of re/presentations of oneself is what we know as the process of identity construction.

Applied to the nightlife of young adults, this reflection is the study of the interactions between peers in public socialisation spaces (premises such as bars or discos) and during encounters in the private scope (more specifically, at dinners held at home). We have tried to understand how individuals aged between 20 and 30 living in Stockholm and Paris, (1) experience nightlife accompanied by their peers and how they get the impression that they are approaching adulthood through their ways of going out.

The evolution is similar between the two groups studied. The French, like the Swedish, at first tend to gather in public places and then prefer to get together at home. Thus here we see a tendency to get away towards the private scope, a priority of the domestic space translated into the organisation of dinners with a small number of guests (four to six people).

(1)
In the framework of my doctoral thesis, I spent nine months in Stockholm in order to hold some semi-conducted interviews and make some participatory observations. Then I spent a year working in the Parisian field. This proximity with the populations under study has allowed me to share their everyday life, carry out a series of informal debates on the topic and thus hold a series of constant exchanges between the field of study and the analysis. Overall, I held 54 formal interviews, which lasted 1:30 hours each, in both cities. The result of this study entitled "Social relations as a space to form identity. Comparative study between young people living in Stockholm and Paris" were publicly read in December 2002 at the Descartes - Paris V University, as a work conducted by D. Desjeux.

This change in habits is often described in relation to the tiredness caused by work and the dying desire to go out when cohabiting with a partner. However, we believe that there is still another explanation: the reduction in the number of outings to public spaces is understood given their lack of efficiency when it comes to the construction of one's identity.

This article presents the different ways of nightlife socialisation amongst young Swedish people. Through their words we will be able to clearly see the implicit norm indicating the behaviour to be followed in order to be included in the "young" or the "adult" group, as well as the way to evolve from one towards the other. Having described these two spaces-times of socialisation (young/public space, adult/private space), we will suggest some clues for interpretation in order to clarify the features of the Swedish case.

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I. Motivations to socialise in public places

Meetings with friends usually take place as an encounter in a bar at sometime of the evening (from 6 to 7 PM). Sometimes people have a drink and then have dinner, as some bars offer a menu. At weekends people meet later on (around 9 PM) and continue until closing time (most places close at 2 AM). Which are the motivations to go out to these places at night?

1. Going out as a way to break one's routine

Going out to a bar represents a moment of freedom. On one hand, we think that having friends at home demands a certain level of preparation whereas going out to a bar saves us from "*doing the housework and shopping*". Therefore, having friends at home is regarded as something that requires some effort. It also means one has to have alcohol at home. The sale of alcohol in Sweden in monopolised by the State and can only be purchased in off-licence shops (System Bolaget), which are open from Monday to Friday from 11 AM to 6 PM. (2) Those people who wish to invite their friends must prepare these purchases beforehand, which represents an additional effort. Besides the "*organisational effort*", the economic cost of the event can tilt the scales to the side of outings, as it would be more expensive for the host to purchase alcohol for the guests at the System Bolaget than paying for drinks at a bar.

On the other hand, going out to bars is a way to "*change atmospheres*". The outing is presented as a way to break with everyday life and a bar becomes one's "*third room*". If conversations between friends there "*flow better*", it is in a way because it is noisier than at home: *"As the music is louder one has to speak louder and ends up speaking more. If a room is in silence, if there is complete silence people remain quiet, but this does not happen when you go out. All sorts of things are happening around you and you to become chaotic, you speak, you make noise, you shout." (Erik, 22, works and lives by himself).* In addition to this, the interviewees who smoke make the most of the situation and smoke without having to worry about the smell at home the day after. (3) A third example of this feeling of freedom is the possibility of dancing in nightclubs: "*you go out to see people, to see some movement and talk, in general you do it to change and if you like dancing, this can be a reason too." (Karin, 25, works and lives with her partner).*

(2)
Since 1999, when this field study was conducted, opening and closing times have changed and it is now possible to purchase alcohol on Saturdays.

(3)
The Swedish law against smoking in public spaces was implemented in summer 2005.

Bars and clubs are therefore considered as a "*neutral territory*", which puts all individuals in equal conditions. This image of the bar acquires all its sense when people who are not acquainted get together because their home seems to be "*too intimate*" just to welcome mere "*acquaintances*". Nightclubs are the "*third room*" where we can be effectively surrounded by strangers, thus favouring our feeling of anonymity and resulting freedom. The presence of people outside the group of friends contributes to the festive environment and favours the distinction between outings and meetings at home. If single people think that going out to bars is "*more fun*" and those with partners don't, maybe it is because they might meet their future partner there: "*(What is interesting about going out?) Seeing people and meeting people... it probably is about meeting a guy, I think that's it. Those who already have a steady relationship tend to go home earlier and there must be a reason for that." (Tamara, 24, works, lives on her own).* Anonymous equals exchange looks, which does not mean that any contact will be made. Individuals who go out in groups tend to stay with their friends and contact with strangers is not that common. That is why they go to bars and clubs, because there they can stay with friends and "*see people*", but "*not speak to them*".

2. An - implicit - social pressure to go out

Having analysed our studies in depth, it becomes more obvious that these outings to nightclubs respond to one rule: doing what is considered "*fair*"; that means, staying in fashion by doing something "*nice*": "*I think that all this is sending us signals. After all, going out is 'fair'... I think some of my friends fancy being in nice places more than I do, whereas I do not have a bad time when I go out with them.*" *(Marko, 24, student, lives by himself)*. The presence of an individual in "*nice*" bars, that is to say, "*fashionable bars*", gives him/her a certain identity. He/she is observing and being observed by equal actors, who reflect this image of a "*fair*" identity: "*I believe that an identity is formed, I know the nice places to go to and that gives a good impression of you, it gives you confidence, power and the idea that you are someone important." (Marko).* Here we can see the idea that the presentation of certain aspects of one's identity can help towards the individual's formation. The aspect presented is confirmed by the other person's look, which works as a "confirmation of identity" and the individual becomes comfortable in his/her role ("*this gives you confidence*"). For instance, here the role played is of someone who knows how to identify and stay in fashion by going to the "*nice*" bars.

In the case of those who want to "*go with the flow*" by going to the "*nice*" bars, they have to gather information and the ability to analyse the market, so just the fact of not going out so frequently becomes a limitation. Those who stay at home every afternoon and weekend risk being considered as a "*bore*": "*Why do we want to go out?... I think it's because we want to relax and change, although it can get a bit much sometimes. It is not my case, but I think others do get this feeling more than I do. (Why is it a bore?) You have to go out, if you don't, you are a bore if you stay at home on Friday night." (Marko).* However, it is also about the perception others have of the way this person *thinks*, the identity he/she believes that the members of the reference

group award him/her. This is the case of those people who become subjected to the rule that encourages them to go to the fashionable places; to them the looks they get from others are more important, as they could void the identity this person wants to have. This dissension between the comfort of staying at home and the "*pressure*" of going out shows that these individuals give their peers certain power and efficiency. This is why the absence of a nightlife leads to the cancellation of our identity and the loss of a chance to recover our own image through other people's looks.

3. The identity function of our equal anonymous peers

The young adults interviewed in Stockholm have described the wide variety of outings, ranging from having a few drinks in the evening to going dancing in a club. However, the nature of exchanges between strangers is still the same: an exchange of looks rather than verbal exchanges. The vast majority of interviewees admitted not going to bars to meet people, as some of their opinions about these encounters, whether friendly or sexual, were: "*they have no charm*", "*meeting your partner in a bar seems dirty*", "*you don't make friends in a bar*". However, we have noticed some direct interactions between strangers. What matters here is not so much the difference between what is said and what is done, but rather what these declarations reveal about the *representations* of the practice. The role assigned officially to each anonymous peer is that of a silent mirror whose looks can guide us to the expression of ourselves. The bet on identity is reduced here to what can be expressed *through just the presence in nightclubs*; they have chosen to go to the same bars, which means they have something in common. This gives them the capacity and legitimacy to confirm each other.

Little by little, people go out less frequently at night. This general evolution has been described as something "*natural*", and has been explained in reference to the feeling caused by outings: "*you just don't have the strength to go out"*, "*you are so tired*". However, besides physical tiredness, should we not also consider a type of tiredness associated to this kind of socialisation? Indeed, some of the interviewees established the difference between the socialisation practices characterised as something a "*teenager would do*" and the types of meetings preferred "*now*". To them, what they have already experienced in their biographical transition, that is to say, the evolution of the practices perceived as belonging to the "*young*" towards meetings that are more suitable for "*adults*" is translated in several ways: a change from *"quality"* to "*quantity"* (going from one bar to another is replaced by staying at the same place all night); one goes from anonymity to intimacy (fewer "*superficial*" exchanges with strangers met in a fashionable place and a greater preference for exchanges with closer friends); public places are changed for private ones (people tend to stay at home). In other words, the motivation to go out at night and "go with the flow" is progressively reduced.

On the other hand, others experience today what has been described as the past and do not make any distinction between before and now. These testimonies let us see the sense to be followed by the evolution of

socialisation at night: the rule shows the progressive abandonment of the night atmosphere, paying less attention to observing and being observed. The function of validation of identity that was initially awarded to our anonymous peers is slowly displaced onto another group, the group of friends with whom we have privileged conversations and with whom we can show our more "*intimate*" features. This is what will be studied in the next section.

II. Predominance of the domestic sphere

When they were still living at home and the parents were not there, some organised "preliminary outings" with their friends. Others have waited until they could have their own space to meet members from their group of peers before going out. The first years after leaving home (around the age of 20), the private space is used especially as the preliminary stage before going out in the public night atmosphere. Friends would get together at someone's home (to get ready or choose their clothes, for instance), to have a drink or eat something to prepare for the alcohol intake that was to come later that night. This practice is known as "*warming up*", which serves as a type of "snack". These encounters between the group members favour the creation of a festive atmosphere where friends prepare together for the identification test that the outing involves.

On the same lines as the reduction in the number of long nights spent in a bar or a disco after these "preliminary outings", interviewees have expressed their increasing interest in getting together at home without the idea of going out afterwards. These private meetings start beating meetings in bars. Thus, some groups split like this, going out to public places, whereas others decide to stay at home. Little by little, the private sphere starts acquiring importance by itself.

1. Paradox representation of meetings in a private space

Home gatherings can be held in different ways: around a dinner served on the table, in front of the TV with some "*dinner trays*" or even at a do where food is served could in a buffet. What we are focusing on here is those meetings were people gather to have dinner around the table. These can vary between "*mixed*" dinners for men and women, "*dinners for couples*" (just for couples) and "*unisex*" dinners, just for people of the same sex.

While some consider that meeting in a bar is more "*practical*" for some reasons we mentioned earlier, those supporting meetings at home state as their main reason the "*cosy*" atmosphere created in them. On one hand, as friends get together at home they award less importance to their looks; and, on the other, the "*relaxed*" meetings of the private atmosphere favour private conversations, and some even say that the exchanges are "*deeper*" than those held in bars. However, in interviews it was revealed that many of the interviewees award great importance to the preparation of their private space before their guests arrive, a fact that maybe changes the relaxed aspect of these meetings. The same way we consider that clothes inform us about an individual's identity, having friends at home is also a way to reveal

some aspects of our identity. Indeed, we can see some features of the latter in the decoration and arrangement of objects at home. The preparation of the space at home (tidying things and cleaning the house) can be interpreted as a way to control the image we are giving our host.

Regarding the organisation of the dinner setting, there has been an evolution. At first friends used to have dinner on the floor with spare dishes but others believe in the increasing importance of using some nice plates neatly on a table. On the same lines, little by little there is an increasing interest in the preparation of dishes that sometimes need to be prepared from a recipe book. Together with this general trend we can see the evident individual variations. Some believe, for instance, that amongst close friends the roles of the guest and the host disappear and the guests are on equal levels. However, in meetings with not so close friends each person's attitudes acquire greater levels of formality. Not showing the suitable behaviour could lead to unpleasant situations, something that has been expressed with laughter during the interviews, and establishes the fact that some things are not likely to happen (such as giving a friend a flower at an improvised dinner). What we are dealing with here is the ability to evaluate the role (Giddens, 1987, Kaufmann, 1998) that each one is supposed to play, which leads us back to the introduction and therefore the testing of the identification features considered appropriate depending on the type of meeting (improvised or planned dinner, "*video night*" or birthday dinner, etc).

2. Evolution towards "adult" practices: example of the dinner for couples

Here we are going to pay special attention to "*dinners for couples*", a type of meeting that has become more popular as the members of a group of friends have romantic relationships and start to cohabit. These dinners are only aimed at couples and single people are excluded. This way being single can become a social obstacle as these meetings are oriented towards the private space and tend to increase in number.

These dinners are considered as a form of "adult" socialisation for various reasons. Compared to mixed dinners, they are considered more "*formal*"; verbal exchanges are organised symmetrically and conversations are held in couples. Another particular feature to do with the general atmosphere of the night: more "*relaxed*" when single and married people are together and more "*intense*" when there are only couples: "*Perhaps the atmosphere will be slightly more intense when people have dinner in couples. Quite often one talks to one member of the couple and it is less intense than when there are various people and maybe there are some pauses between two conversations." (Christian, 26, works and lives by himself).* If mixed dinners are favoured by a certain level of preparation, dinners for couples have features of "*dinners for adults*"; therefore, special attention is paid to the presentation of the house, serving a dinner with several courses, low noise levels, the guests choose their clothing according to different criteria than when it is a mixed dinner or when they go to a bar. Dinners for couples would therefore lack improvisation: "*these dinners are usually held with another couple. It is exactly the same as seeing our parents with their friends,*

eating, drinking wine, it's like... it's something strange. (Does it bother you or do you like it?) No, quite the opposite, I find it really pleasant and they work out quite well. You have the chance to speak and tell stuff, to know about what others do. I think they are a really good idea. They are fun." (Karin, 25, works and lives with her partner).

While some declare that they regret evolving towards this kind of more "*adult*" meeting, others experience it as something "*normal*" and see no differences with a mixed dinner: *"There is no difference. At the end of the day, if one of the couples had a child...but that is not the case in our circle of friends." (Jonatan, 26, works and lives with his partner).* Regarding those single people who observe this practice from outside, there are some who are sorry not to have the means to take part, whereas others criticise it: "*(What do you think this evolution is due to?) Well, I don't know, I find it absurd (laughter). Well, I think it's great that people make an effort, but I don't know why they do it. I think it's a way to move towards adulthood in a way... it's no so relaxed anymore, I don't know why." (Andreas, 25, works and shares a flat).* Other people who are alone are limited to stating this practice amongst their married friends without judging.

Some of the interviewed perceive dinners for couples as an adult thing to do and do not feel comfortable with this representation. That is why when this type of meeting is criticised and compared to a *game* we can see that they do not correspond to the usual forms of socialisation between these individuals. Their words refer to an implicit norm indicating the evolution that dinners at home should follow "young" to "adult" practices. On the other hand, others do not see dinners for couples as something different to mixed dinners and believe that the children will be what will make the couple break away from all kinds of meetings.

3. Position against a rule and experimentation with identity

Amongst young Swedish adults the level of preparation of the dinner is understood according to two elements: how close guests and hosts are, in which case close friends can come over in an improvised manner, unlike what happens with "*acquaintances*", and the interpretation they make of the rule indicating the evolution of "young" practices towards "adult" behaviours. Some follow the "young" style and have their friends over spontaneously, while others follow the "adult" style and thus put a lot into the preparation of the event.

Even if most of the interviewees agree on the definition of this norm, they do not apply it in the same way. Some practice dinners for couples and other don't; some simply because they are not interested in this type of socialisation. Likewise, we must pay attention to the fact that they do not have the same attitude towards this type of norm. Some pass negative judgments on dinners for couples and others don't at all. One woman said they were "*strange*" and "*boring*", whereas another one said she didn't like them but that "*they weren't exactly like seeing our parents with their friends*".

All these attitudes refer to the same norm but from different points of view. These differences can be understood as several other stages in the evolutionary axis ranging from a "young" style and moving towards an adult" style. Some are far from the objective and others have already reached it, whereas others are badly getting used to the transition. In any case, these young adults find in these interactions with their peers a particular way to experiment their position against the norm prescribing the evolution towards "adult" practices. In the domestic space, close friends are considered as the ones in charge of the norm, those who have the power to acknowledge, confirm and (in)validate the normative position of the others.

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How do we interpret this importance awarded to other people's opinions? How do we understand the priority of the latter and not of the family, for instance, in the elaboration of the norm indicating the stages towards adulthood? As a conclusion, we will present some cultural and social aspects to gain a better perspective of the data drawn from the field research.

Swedish culture values an "individualistic" conception of the relationship between the individual and society: each one must be perceived as equal to the rest. (4) Individuals come before the group, their actions do not arise so much from the pressure made by the group as from their personal decision; they are defined by themselves from the beginning and less according to their environment (Sjögren, 1993; Daun, 1994). This value is found in the basis of the model for the universal Providence State, a form of government found in Sweden since World War II. We can refer to a large number of political and social measures whose objective is the practice of these principles, the promotion of independence against the original group. This way, all those people who have a child get some financial family aids regardless of the number of children. From the age of 16 (at the end of compulsory secondary education), young people are directly benefited from these aids, which therefore do not go towards the people they are in charge of. Any young person who continues studying (whether at secondary or higher levels) will have a grant. These examples give us an idea of the category that young people are assigned in this country: rather than being considered as their parents' children, they are part of a process of «*familiarisation*» (5) of the treatment given to the young population, where they are considered as individuals regardless of the group they belong to. The aid system allows to turn young people into adults as quickly as possible and make them independent from their families by providing them with an individual maintenance system. Other applications of this conception of the individual in the educational and familiar system can be seen - for instance - in the general maintenance aids stated in the provisions of the civil rights (Jarvin, 2001).

Here is where the paradox is found. If this ideology characterising the Swedish model puts the *individual* first, how can we understand the importance that our interviewees give to the opinions of their *peers*? And how can we interpret the references to a common rule? We have the following hypothesis to explain this: as the evolution takes place in a system that tends to reduce the differences and that puts at the level of

(4)
See for instance «Suède: l'égalité des sexes en question », *Cahiers du Genre,* n°27, 2000; *La protection sociale en Europe*, éds C. Daniel et B. Palier, 2001; *Comparer les systèmes de protection sociale en Europe du Nord et en France*, volume 4, book 1&2, 1999.

(5)
«*Although the government aid is given to parents as family aids and for the maintenance of the family rates, from the point of view of identity it is presupposed that from the beginning a young adult will be perceived as "son of" or "daughter of".*» (from Singly, 2000:15).

representation the set of individuals as equals (political and social measures are an expression of this), individuals wish to impose situational rules for themselves. As individuals are not regarded in the *first place* unless they are not members of a group and provided that their development depends *first* on them before being integrated in the immediate environment, (6) they must create their own reference system, should they approach anything that has not originally arisen from the group they belong to. We can interpret the importance awarded to the group of peers from this point of view. If peers always play a socialising role, here they seem to be more of a reference that individuals can choose freely. Socialising in a system whose relations are more equal than hierarchical, it seems that peers form the first reference group as they are the "closest" ones (this term does not refer to an emotional relation, but rather to proximity in age and social category). This is why these peers set up a personal system of values. The group respects this system, which from then onwards becomes their reference. That is why the pressure made by this rule is understood: because it was established by young people themselves, and has not been transmitted by their parents.

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(6)
This comment is not an obvious rejection of the importance of family links, but it aims at remembering the definition of an "individual-oriented" ideology.