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Negotiating Controls, Perils, and Pleasures in the Urban Night: Working-Class Youth in Early-Twentieth-Century Antwerp

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the night-time activities of youth as they developed in the city of Antwerp in the first half of the twentieth century. In this period, explosive growth of the city's consumption and entertainment functions altered patterns of urban nightlife, while at the same time, drastic changes in the social positions of working-class youths provided them with new forms of social and financial independence and freedoms. This provoked serious official and public anxieties about 'loose' and 'unsupervised' activities of young wage-earners, especially about those of girls, as well as attempts to watch their nightlife more closely. The urban night and its associated 'dark' amusements such as the dance-halls and movies were considered as primary sources of juvenile misconduct since they offered possibilities to escape from parental and other 'protective' supervision.

This article examines how this new problem-definition of youth and night affected the deployment of control mechanisms oriented towards youngsters in Antwerp, looking in particular at the strategies of two central actors in the regulation of youngsters' access to the night – the police and parents. On the other hand, the article investigates the ways in which the evening and night spaces of the city functioned as an outlet for experimentation among working-class youth with new attitudes of social autonomy and new sexual codes.

Introduction

Night and disorder have been perennial concerns in many cultures, as well as the regulation of night-time activities in the city (Baldwin, 2012). In crime surveys, a standard question pertaining to feelings of insecurity is: "*Are you afraid to be out on the streets at night?*". In urban governance, curfews or interdictions against entering the city's public spaces at night remain a regularly used instrument ever since early urbanisation (recent examples include curfews in the city of Antwerp in response to COVID-19 and in several US cities following street protests). At certain moments in history, official and public concerns about life after dark in the city intensified even more, generating waves of "moral panic" (Cohen, 1972) and new restrictive measures.

The turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century was one such period of heightened anxieties about the urban night, not only in Western urban centres (Baldwin, 2012) but also in cities such as Rio de Janeiro (Chazkel, 2020) and Istanbul (Ileri, 2017). Accelerated growth of cities' populations, transport networks, and consumption and entertainment functions significantly changed patterns of urban nightlife. The night-time city saw increasing movement of people and goods and, in particular, a growing presence of the working classes, either for work or for consumption and leisure (Schlör, 1991). At the same time, in a context of growing socio-economic inequality, bourgeois elites increasingly perceived the urban labouring poor as "dangerous classes" (a term introduced by Parisian police officer Honoré Frégier in 1840; Frégier, 1840, p. 7) and subjected them to a "civilising offensive" (De Koster & Vrints, 2020).

In their attempts to discipline the urban poor and control nocturnal disorder, urban reformers and authorities developed two main strategies: policing and lighting. All major European cities expanded and professionalised their municipal police forces (Paris, Berlin, and Saint-Petersburg as early as in the late eighteenth century), organised night patrols, and instructed their constables to check whether doors and windows were securely locked and to repress excessive noise in the streets at night (De Koster & Vrints, 2020; Denys, 2010). New means of lighting, on the other hand, first served to expand daytime economic activities into the night, make commercial districts more attractive, and beautify the city, but quickly became used in law and order maintenance as well. The implementation of street lighting was, however, distributed unevenly across the city's territory: it was mostly reserved for the upper- and middle-class districts, whose better-off residents could effectively pressure urban authorities into protecting their lives, property, and sleep. Differences in lighting thus became a marker of status and "*highlighted for the first time the popular contrast of areas at once poor and dark with others that were wealthy and bright*" (Bouman, 1987, p. 12).

It was in the "dark" city quarters that most of the nightlife was concentrated, and around the turn of the twentieth century, this attracted ever larger numbers of working-class young people. Working more often in factories as independent wage earners, they acquired a greater freedom of movement and some money to spend, while new amusements such as cinemas and dance halls rapidly multiplied. As a result, urban reformers and government officials became very concerned about the so-called "terrible freedom" of working-class young people and increasingly attempted to shield them from premature exposure to the "dark wisdom" to be gained in urban public space at night (Baldwin, 2002; Fowler, 1995).

Historical research on young people's participation in the early "night-time economy" has focused mainly on bourgeois discourses and the legal frameworks and policy measures deployed to regulate it. Only recently have historians begun to ask the question as to whether these control ambitions were translated into practice and how young people's access to the urban night was actually regulated on an everyday basis (Baldwin, 2002; Commachio, 2006). This article firstly aims to contribute to these recent enquiries by examining the actors and strategies involved in the regulation of the night-time activities of young people in Antwerp in the early twentieth century, focusing both on police control and on social control by parents and relatives. Secondly, and more importantly, we address the still largely unanswered question of how young people experienced and evaded these controls and used the city evenings and nights to pursue their own, alternative goals and desires. As Schlör (1991) ar-

gues, the story of the night-time city has traditionally been told by police and missionaries; rarely do we hear that story recounted by the lower classes, families, or young nightlife consumers themselves. The key contribution this paper attempts to make is, therefore, to reconstruct the night-time uses and experiences of urban public space in the early twentieth century from the perspective of working-class young people themselves.

Our focus is on the city of Antwerp, which, much like other major urban centres in this period, saw an explosive growth of its consumption and entertainment functions and, as a burgeoning port city, large flows of people and goods, all resulting in a particularly bustling nightlife (De Koster & Vrints, 2020). Drawing on police and judicial archival records from the first half of the twentieth century that detail everyday policing and the lives of young wage earners and their families in Antwerp, the article develops two main arguments. First, we show that despite elite demands for fierce regulation, in practice, night-time policing did not target young people in particular and stuck to its traditional focus on public-order maintenance: keeping the city streets quiet and safe during the night. Parents and relatives were the main agents responsible for controlling young people's night-time activities, not the police. Second, shifting the perspective to that of working-class young people, this article argues that nightlife was central to the emergence of a first youth culture, in which young people used the darkness primarily to escape from ordinary life and experiment with new social and sexual codes.

The first section of the paper clarifies how the urban night is understood here and why this implies focusing on practices – and failures – of night-time regulation and on the perspective of nightlife consumers. Next, a note on the sources used explains the possibilities and limits of reconstructing the experience of historical actors from a fragmented archival corpus. The following sections turn to young people and the night: they respectively discuss the framing of the issue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the evening and night spaces in Antwerp in which young wage earners moved about, the night-time governance of these young people by the police and by parents, and, finally, the uses and meanings that young people assigned to Antwerp's night-time spaces.

The Urban Night as a Transgressive Time-space: Central Concepts

Rather than being a passive or natural phase that occurs between dusk and dawn, the night, as it is discussed here, is a contested and dynamic "time-space", shaped by social struggles about what should and should not happen in certain places during the dark of the night. Although it forms part of the cyclical rhythm of the 24-hour day, the night contains its own distinctive human activities: in the dark of night, spaces are often approached and appropriated differently than during the light of day. Lefebvre (1991, p. 320) wrote about "night-time spaces" with regard to prohibited activities, like prostitution, which were "permitted" only at night in certain areas of Paris.

Williams, in his discussion of night-time spaces, draws upon Deleuze's notion of deterritorialisation to explain the manner in which space, at night, shifts in meaning, form, use, and purpose. By virtue of darkness, space at night can be destabilising and comes with a whole different set of social relations, exclusions, and inclusions to the day. Darkness has deterritorialising possibilities because it provides opportunities to avoid being seen – opportunities that can be used as the basis for socially transgressive behaviours. It can thus obscure, obstruct, or otherwise hinder government policies, business strategies, or social codes of conduct that seek to direct activities and desires into socially "appropriate" places, and reinforce some semblance of conventional order and regularity in the darkness (Williams, 2008).

Darkness can be used for resistance and protest. Schivelbusch (1995, p. 106) mentions the example of the smashing of street lanterns during the socio-political revolt in Paris in 1830, which "*erected a wall of darkness, so to speak, protecting an area from incursion by government forces*". Similarly, Palmer (2000, p. 454) states that the urban night was a "*space in which the ubiquitous contestations of everyday life were fought out on a terrain that afforded slightly more opportunity for engagement by the oppressed and the exploited*". Chazkel confirms that in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, members of

the city's immense enslaved population and the growing number of free persons of African descent used the darker hours for resistance against oppression (Chazkel, 2020).

The "counter-hegemonic" potential of the night in the past should, however, not be exaggerated, although it is understandable that in the light of today's aggressive commodification of the night-time economy (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003) and intensification of surveillance in nightlife districts (Van Liempt, 2016), the nineteenth-century urban night looks like a "paradise lost" to some. But rebellious or illegal uses of the night are only a few of many others that deserve attention, some "adventurous", others more routine, some socially transgressive, others simply expressing different conceptions of normality and conventionality (Roberts & Eldridge, 2009). For Lefebvre, the leisure spaces of club life are "spaces of representation" where people express their thoughts, ideas, dreams, hopes, and despair, and thus hold an emancipatory potential. Although helping to reproduce capitalism, night-time leisure spaces also express modes of existence other than that of the oppressive routinisation of work: they evoke joy and stimulate the "out of the ordinary" (Lefebvre, 1991; Williams, 2008).

The concept of "transgression", introduced by cultural criminologists, is useful here because it shifts our attention from disorder and law breaking towards the perspective of nightlife consumers themselves, who might intend to be "disobedient" in some way, but often simply pursue their own, different needs and desires (Hayward & Young, 2004). The idea that various social groups and individuals use night-time spaces to their own ends, displaying what German-language historians of everyday life call "*Eigensinn*" (Davis, Lindenberger & Wildt, 2008), is also implied in Michel de Certeau's notion of "spatial tactics". For de Certeau, people create or "write" their city in their everyday practices: through small, sometimes even routine actions, people make place for themselves, reappropriating urban public space (de Certeau, 1980). Since night-time spaces are negotiated and dynamic, they are multiple, overlapping, and sometimes even contradictory (Williams, 2008). This is what makes their regulation difficult and often resulting in failure and perverse effects.

Indeed, studies on seventeenth-century Zurich (Casanova, 2007), nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro (Chazkel, 2020), and on Bologna and Montpellier today (Giordano, Gabriele, Tommaso & Crozat, 2019) all conclude that measures aiming to discipline "excessive" (drunk, loud, violent, etc.) night-time behaviours and reduce their temporal extension often have limited or even counterproductive effects. The main result is the exclusion from nightlife of some populations on the basis of social class, race, gender, age, and/or religion. Further, instead of influencing the temporality of nightlife, such restrictive regulations have rather tended to change its spatiality, often causing a displacement towards less regulated areas (parks, public spaces, private homes), which are designed for other uses and not adequately equipped (Giordano, Gabriele, Tommaso & Crozat, 2019).

Conflicts between control agencies and the "policed" are not the only type of social struggles taking place at night. A "right to the night" is claimed by many actors that often have antagonistic requests and uses of urban space, related to different social times. In many cities, the development of the night-time economy has led to the exacerbation of conflicts between residents and other urban populations, due to making noise in a time traditionally dedicated to rest (Giordano, Gabriele, Tommaso & Crozat, 2019). Pressured by electoral concerns and their need for public support, urban authorities tend to side with the complaining residents in these conflicts, especially the wealthy and adult ones (Walker, 2017). We saw earlier that this goes back to the late eighteenth century at least, when one of the primary tasks assigned to the new urban police forces was to keep the "respectable" streets quiet at night (Denys, 2010). This had not changed by the early twentieth century, as will be discussed for the city of Antwerp below.

Uses of night-time spaces are multiple; our experience of the city at night is dependent on factors such as age, class, or gender, and, historically, the meanings attached to the night-time city have also changed over time. With regard to youngsters, the question thus concerns what uses young nighthawks make of certain urban spaces and what particular meanings they assign to them at certain periods in time. Cultural criminologists have coupled young people's transgressions with the reappropriation of public space, the shaping of (or struggle for) a group identity, the development of a sense of belonging, and the simple pursuit of pleasure (Hayward, 2004; Katz, 1988). Presdee (2000, p. 9)

associates this with leading a "second life" that is *"(…) lived in the cracks and holes of the structures of official society. It searches for and finds the unpunishable whilst official society seeks to dam up the holes, and fill the cracks, criminalizing as it does and making punishable the previously unpunishable*". From this perspective, the urban night looks like a privileged site for this "underlife of the city" (Hayward & Young, 2004).

It is important, however, as Amin and Thrift (2002) rightfully remark, not to get stuck in the cliché of the romantic night-time city populated by scoundrels, lovers, and pleasure seekers. In order to understand the complex and diverse experiences and meanings of life after dark in the city, one should move beyond traditional oppositions to pleasure and fear, control, and disorder, etc. These emotions and experiences exist side by side and it is all about moving in between them, Hubbard (2005, p. 120) suggests: "*For some, 'going out' in the city induces anxiety-like symptoms and uncertainty (…) for others, the apparently risky nature of night-life is part of its appeal (…) For most though the challenge is to negotiate these pleasures and dangers, using practical knowledge of the city to avoid situations they would rather not deal with while seeking out forms of pleasure and stimulation.*"

Note on the Archival Sources and their Investigation

This article draws on police and juvenile court records from Antwerp from the first half of the twentieth century (see list of sources and archival references at the end of the paper). These archival records are very valuable because they contain testimonies (in witness depositions and interrogation reports) and sometimes also ego-documents (letters, etc.) that provide unique access to the lives and voices of historical actors, in particular to those of the lower classes who left far fewer traces in the historical record than elites. There is a long tradition of social historians who have used police and judicial archives to document the lives of people on the margins (see Arlette Farge's seminal work on archival investigation, *Le gout de l'archive*, 1989). Unfortunately, these records are only partially preserved, often damaged, lacking documents, handwritten and difficult to decipher, etc. When criminologist Mary Bosworth, after doing research in the archives of an eighteenth-century women's prison in Paris (*la Salpêtrière*), called this "*complicated*" because the past needs to be reconstructed "*from discontinuous scraps of information*" (Bosworth, 2001, pp. 434–435), she described what historians know all too well. The evidence is there but needs to be teased out of the archival record, reading "against the grain" and weaving a pattern from traces of information. The evidence presented here is, unfortunately, also fragmentary.

Police reports (*processen-verbaal*) document the day-to-day policing of the city: police arrests, victims' complaints, citizens calling for help, neighbourhood conflicts (De Koster & Vrints, 2020). Strikingly, children and young people do not appear often in these official records. For example, although social commentaries made frequent mentions of territorial rivalry fights between groups of youths in the early twentieth-century cities, they only rarely found their way explicitly into police sources (see Vrints (2019) for Antwerp and Wolcott (2015) for Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles). As we will argue in more detail below, most incidents involving young people were simply dealt with informally by the police and resolved on the ground, without leaving a paper trail.

Parental control left more traces in the archival record. Belgium, like many other European and North American juvenile justice systems (Myers, 2006; Odem, 1995; Strange, 1995) had a "parental correction" procedure in its Child Protection Act of 1912 (Article 14) whereby parents could file a complaint with the juvenile judge against their son or daughter for "misbehaviour" – a heritage of the parental authority anchored in the Napoleonic Code of 1804 (De Koster, 2018). Such cases provide unique insights into private familial conflicts – and the accounts of both parties – and are often centred around the son's or daughter's nightlife, as we will see below.

Juvenile court records also contain reports by social workers, medical-psychological experts, and other justice officials: viewing juveniles' lifestyles, families, morality, etc. through a bourgeois lens, these accounts have to be interpreted with caution. The same goes for publications by social commentators

and moral reformers on the lives and crimes of the working class from the early twentieth century (used here: Collard, 1920; Racine, 1935; Sledsens, 1929). As the archival evidence is fragmentary, however, they sometimes provide valuable complementary information.

"Young people" is defined here as teenagers and young adults aged between 15 and 25. Following the Belgian law on compulsory education of 1914, children under 15 were not allowed to work and were obliged to go to school (until 12 at least). Our police and juvenile court records also reflect this: the (few) teenagers appearing here, because they hung out at fairs, cinemas, bars, or dance halls, were mostly 15 or older. Twenty-five is an appropriate upper limit because of the average age of marriage, which marked the transition to adulthood: in 1910, Belgian women married around the age of 24, men around 28. For economic reasons, working-class young people often had to wait quite long before they could get married in this period (Devos, 1999).

The "Youth and Night" Problem in the Early Twentieth Century

From the late nineteenth century onwards, explosive growth of cities' consumption and entertainment functions led to increasing night-time use of urban public spaces, and confronted both public and private agencies with the challenge of steering this "new" urban night and its inhabitants in an "orderly" fashion (Baldwin, 2012; Schlör, 1991). This meant, on the one hand, ensuring a controlled course of urban activities that were attractive or economically interesting for adults and, on the other hand, shielding young people from the vice and dangers associated with the same activities (Baldwin, 2002). Indeed, both in the official and in the public mind, night became more associated with vice and danger than ever before. A woman who was on a dark street without an escort was almost certainly a prostitute, also known as a "nightwalker". Men were likely to be out for debauchery, if not crime (Beaumont, 2015; Commachio, 2006; Gibson, 2000; Piper, 2010). Four young Antwerp men who molested a local police officer while he was off duty at 2h30 in the morning were also referred to as "*a bunch of nightwalkers*" (*nachtlopers*) (Antwerp police, 5th district, report 1321, 02/06/1912).

These concerns about disreputable activities at night came to focus more than ever on the city's young people, as drastic changes in the social positions and lives of working-class youths took place. Urbanisation, a heightened rate of migration, and an ever-growing wage labour economy expanded work, leisure, and spending opportunities for young working-class people and offered them unprecedented freedom from family restrictions. This provoked considerable anxiety about the "loose" and "unsupervised" activities of young wage earners. In particular, the night-time and its associated "dark" amusements such as the dance halls, the cinemas, and theatres were considered the primary sources of juvenile misconduct since they allowed young people to escape from parental and other "protective" supervision and discipline (Commachio, 1997; De Koster, 2018; McBee, 2000; Williams, 2001).

Many social workers noted "*dance halls/movies*" under the heading "*special habits and tendencies*" on the standard information form that they completed for the juvenile judge. Even in the company of a parent, going out to dance was problematic in bourgeois eyes, as the following report from June 1924 suggests: "*The mother is a lowlife who does not have a clue about the education of children (…) On Sundays, the girl can accompany her mother to cinemas and dance halls*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 2894, 1924). Another family, on the other hand, was described as "*extraordinarily decent*" and "*a notable exception among our working class*" because "*father, mother, and children never go to the movies and dance halls*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 3004, 1924).

As a result of such concerns, which were present in many Western countries in this period, numerous bourgeois efforts were undertaken to guide young wage earners toward supervised recreation in youth movements, organised dances, and sports clubs, to subject their night-time activities to greater police surveillance, and to criminalise and prosecute rebellious or "debauched" juvenile behaviour. New juvenile justice legislations, that of Belgium included, incorporated new-status offences such as "vagrancy", "misbehaviour", and "debauchery" that targeted young female wage earners in particular (De Koster, 2018; Myers, 2006; Odem, 1995; Strange, 1995).

Public and official anxieties centred especially on girls: whereas for boys, going out with friends or on "dates" to movies and dance halls, spending money on fashionable clothing, and experimenting with new social customs were generally perceived as quite "normal" expressions of the new youth culture, such activities were associated with trouble and moral deprivation in the case of girls (Auspert, De Koster & Massin, 2020). The rapidly changing urban environment was considered particularly unsafe for unchaperoned (young) women, who were thought to lack any protection against "seduction" and assaults by "savage" males (Collard, 1920). Being increasingly more mobile and less supervised, young working-class women were seen as "walking moral and sexual dangers" in the eyes of moral reformers: they were both a possible threat to themselves (seduction, "white slavery") and a danger to society (sexual diseases, illegitimate pregnancies) (François & Massin, 2008).

Walking alone in the city streets late at night was simply asking for trouble, and at the very least suspect, suggested a social worker in 1925 in her report on 15-year-old Josephina: "*Morality leaves much to be desired; she tends to be late in the street in bad company (...) Seems to be inclined to indecency*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 3018, 1925). Police officers reporting on girls' activities to the juvenile judge also often mentioned "*walks in the streets at night*", "*seeks the company of boys*" ("*even married men*": Antwerp juvenile court, file 152, 1912), and "*works very little*" in the same sentence (for example, Antwerp juvenile court, files 405, 406, and 411, 1913; file 2966, 1924).

This did not mean, however, that boys "hanging around" in the night-time streets escaped from concerns. On the contrary, most commentators agreed that overexposure to the darkness of night would very probably turn them into "good for nothings" and lure them into a dishonest life of vice and crime, if not straight into the urban underworld: gangs of crooks operating at night, networks of pimps, bouncers, and gamblers (Racine, 1935). And even if it did not get that far, working-class youths, it was argued, had become so much under the spell of the new commercial urban amusements that they spent their entire wages on entertainment, and once out of money, they did not hesitate to engage in small thefts or prostitution in order to finance their outings (Collard, 1920; Racine, 1935). According to the Antwerp police, that was indeed the reason why 15-year-old Anna stole "*everything she could lay her hands on*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 2953, 1924) and two young sisters from a very poor family "*sold the clothes that philanthropic organisations donated them on the rag market to be able to go to the movies*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 3052, 1925).

Night Spaces for Juvenile Leisure in Antwerp

As scientific work on the leisure pursuits of working-class young people in twentieth-century Belgium is lacking, the following sketch of juvenile night spaces in Antwerp had to be pieced together using a few archival traces, studies by social commentators from that period, and works from the abundant Anglo-Saxon literature (Commachio, 1997, 2006; Fowler, 1995; Piper, 2010; Strange, 1995).

Public urban space, and in particular the streets, was the main area of working-class sociability, and during the warmer months especially, friendships were maintained on pavements as much as in pubs or other spaces of commercial leisure. The most basic form of communal night-time leisure for young people consisted of simply "hanging out" in the street and *flâneuring*, while adult women or couples sat out in their doorways, chatting to neighbours, with their children playing in the street. For working-class girls and boys, the city streets provided privileged places to meet up after work with groups of (mostly same-sex) friends, exchange gossip, interact with other workers, watch others, and be seen (Vrints, 2019).

Another popular working-class leisure activity, in which young children, youths, and adults participated, consisted of touring the market districts and shopping streets on a Saturday night (Sledsens, 1929). For parents with young children, constrained by the poverty circle, the excursion was particularly valuable as it enabled them to take their families out to enjoy the "entertainment of shopping", and there were bargains to be had, particularly in fresh meat and fish, which traders had no means of storing over the weekend. In the markets and main streets, life was at its gayest and rowdiest, with

open shop fronts lit by flares, competing traders bawling their wares, and narrow streets crowded with buyers and sightseers. This liveliness of the markets was a source of entertainment in itself, and much of it was to be had for free (Baldwin, 2002).

An equally common feature of the urban night scene was the sight of dozens of young people performing polkas and waltzes in the streets to music provided by organ-grinders. Street dances flourished in Antwerp until well into the early twentieth century: dancing was often seen in the alleys and courts of the poorer parts of the city, and even in the side streets turning off from great thoroughfares. Crowds, of mostly children and young men and women, would gather round a barrel organ, and within a few moments many couples would have begun to dance. After the First World War, pubs and inns equipped themselves with "electric pianos" and "phonographs" (Haine, 1998; Vrints, 2019). The Antwerp police regularly cautioned pub owners because there were still couples dancing past official closing time, which the pubs' clientele often did not appreciate, reacting with protest, insults, and violence against the intervening police officers (f.e. Antwerp Police, 5th district, report 175, 16/01/1912; report 877, 07/04/1928; 2nd district, report 1389, 21/08/1928).

Antwerp had a very high number of bars, saloons, and cheap live (*variété*) theatres – in 1924, the Antwerp police counted 3,716 such ventures (Sledsens, 1929, p. 9) – with an especially high concentration in working-class and immigrant neighbourhoods, where whole blocks of streets were cramped with such entertainment (the surroundings of the De Coninckplein in Antwerp's second district and of the railway station in the fifth police district, for example), creating a bustling nightlife (De Koster & Vrints, 2020). Pub life was of central importance to men's networks, adult and juvenile, as relations between neighbours, kin, and workmates could be maintained through a night's drinking. Yet working women and girls, although they had to watch out more for their safety or for being mistaken for a prostitute, also frequented bars and engaged in drinking with friends (Vrints, 2019).

Like young women in Brisbane in the interwar period (Piper, 2010), for example, Antwerp girls did not consider pub life to be an exclusively male territory that was inappropriate for them. Anna, who was 16 years old, told the Antwerp juvenile judge in 1925: "*Yesterday evening we were out; first we went dancing in the Olympia and then we visited some cafes, and went on walking until around 7 o'clock this morning*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 2966, 1925). Another young woman, aged 17, also spoke of staying out in male company until 2 or 3 a.m., "*visiting a couple of bars and taverns*" (Antwerp police, 5th district, report 954, 27/02/1938). Even 15-year-old Marie, whose single mother complained that she stayed out every night, admitted drinking alcohol, dancing with men and ending up having sexual intercourse: "*He made me drink four Amer Picons (…) as a result I was very drunk, not knowing what I was doing, so to speak (…) Around 3 a.m. we left the dance hall (…) he made me drink more (…) undressed me and I did not have the power to resist*" (Antwerp police, 5th district, report 6055, 07/12/1938).

The above testimonies are only a few of many in our police and court files, suggesting that during the interwar decades, young women and young men increasingly turned to the new cinemas and dance halls, which spread rapidly across the city of Antwerp from the late nineteenth century onwards and offered hours of entertainment for a relatively small price. In 1907, the first Antwerp cinema, *Cinema Theater Krüger* on the Keyserlei, was inaugurated, and by the 1920s, the city had a total of 36 cinemas. The number of public dance halls literally exploded between 1890 and 1940: during the interwar period, there were 40 to 50 such places in Antwerp alone (not counting those not officially registered by the police) and they were almost exclusively frequented by working-class young people (Sledsens, 1929). The sheer frequency of mentions in police and juvenile court records of youngsters going out to cinemas and dance halls appears to confirm moral reformers' accounts of a "craze" among city youths for these new evening and night-time amusements (Racine, 1935).

Which were the exact time-spaces of the evening and night, then, that delimitated young people's nightlife? Our evidence suggests that both working-class youths and their parents felt that coming home early meant 11 p.m., staying out late but until an acceptable hour was between midnight and 1 a.m., and any time later than that was "staying out all night". Sixteen-year-old Jeanne, for example, interrogated by the Antwerp juvenile judge in March 1913, stated: "*It is true that I returned home rather late, around 11 o'clock, but this was only on Sundays, I never went out during the week (…) Now that my mother tells me what time I need to be home, I return home early*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 418,

1913). Another 16-year-old had to spend the night with her married sister in February 1913 because when she returned home from an evening of dancing shortly after 11 p.m., her parents had already locked the front door (Antwerp juvenile court, file 412, 1913).

Going out was not only regulated by definitions of "appropriate" times for juvenile nightlife, but financial constraints had a significant impact as well. Working-class youths' spending possibilities and freedom from parental restrictions should not be overestimated, especially not for girls, but not for boys either, and they were unevenly distributed between the two groups. Domestic service, still a very important job sector for girls in Antwerp in the early twentieth century, only provided meagre wages and implied rather strict control and surveillance. Factory work or office work (such as typists, stenographers, clerks), which attracted a steadily growing number of youths throughout the first half of the twentieth century, meant better wages, shorter working hours, Sunday off, working together with young people of the same age, and no control on leisure activities by the employer (De Koster, 2018). Finally, like their adult counterparts, youths from the lower sections of the working class were often confronted with periods of unemployment and irregular earnings, during which access to commercial night-time amusements was largely closed off.

The Informal World of Night-Time Policing of Young people

Before the Second World War, no such thing as juvenile-specific police work existed in Belgium; the policing of children and young people was simply a part of the usual police operations (Campion, De Koster, Keunings, Majerus, Rousseaux & Welter, 2015). In the evenings and at night, police interventions were not necessarily numerous, since the streets were relatively quiet for a large part of the night, but overall, they were very significantly different from the daytime activities of police officers. Night-time police operations focused on checking whether doors and windows were securely locked, enforcing prostitution by-laws, regulations on pubs' closing hours, and "illicit" street dances, checking "suspect" bars and theatres for prostitution and gambling, and maintaining the peace and quiet in the city streets through arrests for public drunkenness and rowdiness and through interventions in fights and brawls (De Koster & Vrints, 2020).

Formal intervention was, however, certainly not a rule in the field; a high level of selectivity entered into the everyday operations of the police, and thus juveniles were only rarely subject to police arrests and prosecution. In general, the police decided entirely on their own, using their discretionary powers, to bring only some juveniles before juvenile court, and resolve most other cases themselves (Vrints, 2019; Wolcott, 2005). The evidence from our selection of police reports suggests that the Antwerp police dealt with a substantial number of cases, on average around 85%, at the station house without ever transferring them to the courts. Moreover, the number of children and adolescents who became the object of a police report was relatively small: youngsters aged between 15 and 25 appeared on average in only 10% of all reports drafted each year, and only one-third of these cases resulted in an arrest. Girls and young women were remarkably under-represented.

Rather than concluding from this that encounters between police and juveniles were few and far between or that the activities of young people were not a police concern during the night-time, it is very plausible that contacts between police and juveniles were often concluded in the field settings where they arose, on the streets, and in a purely informal way. One can additionally assume that youngsters generally managed to move about the city at night in such a way as to avoid any contact or serious trouble with the police. Further, for boys involved in group battles, for example, no honour was to be gained by lodging a complaint that would undoubtedly expose them to the accusation of cowardice (Vrints, 2019).

Although juvenile-specific police control did not exist in the period prior to World War II, the police did develop their own specific understanding of juvenile delinquency and ways of dealing with children, adolescents, and youths. These reflected both their personal perspectives, influenced by years of walking a beat and dealing with young miscreants, and broader policing priorities, i.e. lo-

cal order maintenance and discouraging criminal behaviour via surveillance. With respect to their thinking about juvenile offenders, one could say that the police thought mainly of juveniles as public nuisances or habitual truants. Several police reports mentioned groups of teenage boys from proletarian neighbourhoods, hanging around in the streets after midnight and who would certainly grow up to be criminals. These adolescents insulted bourgeois couples strolling in the evening streets, and were regularly drunk and extremely loud and rowdy (for example, Antwerp police, 5th district, reports 2132, 01/09/1912 and 1504, 23/06/1912). Overall, however, the police and population showed a large degree of tolerance towards group battles among youths, which were viewed as an unproblematic fact of life (Vrints, 2019).

As regards young women, it is worth noting that senior police officers appear to have shared some of the mounting concern of elites and moral reformers about rising "immorality" amongst young working-class wage earners. Around the turn of the century, "occasional" prostitution by young women – girls exchanging sexual favours with men for some money, a place to spend the night, or a ticket to the movies – was noted more frequently in police reports and disapproved of, although not morally condemned like social reformers would. Yet, this went hand in hand with a quite paternalistic and protective attitude towards young women, whom policemen viewed as insufficiently safe in the big and rapidly changing world outside, particularly at night (De Koster, 2017).

Overall, the Antwerp police only intervened in a formal way – producing arrests and reports – when youngsters moved outside of the known "problem neighbourhoods" and into "respectable" streets, and showed very loud or aggressive behaviour. Groups of noisy girls or drunken boys were arrested when they got involved in larger-scale fights in the streets at night, waking up the entire neighbourhood, or when they acted in a disrespectful way towards a police officer telling them to keep the noise down (for example, Antwerp police, 5th district, report 1360, 09/06/1912; Antwerp juvenile court, file 1068, 1915). For young prostitutes walking the streets at night, a similar logic was used: they were apprehended when involved in loud fights with clients or colleagues, or when getting out of their usual working spaces and crossing the territorial boundaries with the "better" city areas to look for clients (De Koster, 2017).

Finally, and not surprisingly, young unchaperoned women in particular quickly became the subject of police attention, as a result of a protective reflex and immediate suspicion of prostitution, especially when they were not known to the police as a local resident (De Koster, 2018). Elvira, who was 14 years old, was arrested in January 1913 because she "*sauntered around in the proximity of the railway station and attracted men's attention*" and the police had already spotted her in the surroundings of the prostitution quarter next to the station the night before. The girl had arrived in Antwerp only five days earlier and had not succeeded in getting a job. Lacking the shelter of a home, she had "*slept in hotels; last night I slept with a gentleman whom I know from the past, but I am not allowed to tell you his name. I only have 1 fr 40 and the clothes I am wearing*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 387, 1913).

In sum, police control of young people's night-time activities in Antwerp was simply part of the police's ordinary concern about maintaining order and keeping the peace and quiet, and was mostly informal, with any problems or incidents being solved on the spot, in the field setting itself. Neither boys nor girls generally encountered too many difficulties in escaping from police attention if they stayed out of noisy street fights and, specifically for girls, if they did not wander alone in the dark city streets. Further, the mobilisation of police regulation of juveniles' night-time activities was overwhelmingly a reactive rather than a proactive process: most contacts between police and juveniles were initiated by citizens, either victims or, in most cases, the youths' parents.

Young Nighthawks and Parental Control

By far the most important and effective regulators of young people's night-time leisure pursuits were their own parents, who used new juvenile justice procedures to discipline their "unruly" son or daughter. As previously mentioned, in Belgium it was the Child Protection Act of 1912 that granted

parents the opportunity to file a complaint against their children with the juvenile judge on charges of "misbehaviour". Very quickly, the number of such parental complaints exploded and continued to rise throughout the interwar period; these cases became by far the single largest category of girls' offences tried by the juvenile courts and a large one amongst "delinquent" boys. Many of the parent-children conflicts involved had to do with sons and daughters going and staying out at night (De Koster, 2018).

The parents of Jeanne, a 16-year-old factory worker who visited the dance halls every single night, stated that their complaint was "*the ultimate yet only remaining option to force her to obey, since it is impossible for us to see what she is doing and she does not want to stay away from her bad companions*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 418, 1913). In the case of boys, often heard complaints were that they had left home or stayed out for whole days and nights on end, they skipped school and hung out on the streets, or they never managed to maintain a steady employment. They smoked, committed petty thefts, visited cinemas and brothels, were involved in gambling... or they ended up in youth gangs. For example, in April 1932, a 14-year-old boy was accused by his mother of "*stealing money at home (...) stays out late at night (...) wanders around the docks*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 4356, 1932).

The night-time activities of youths were not always the central point, however: most complaints by parents constituted, in the first place, a reaction to shifts in the power balance within their families, as their wage-earning children became increasingly financially independent and wanted to spend their own money, while parents became more dependent on the wages of their children for family survival. Indeed, heavy spending on leisure or irregular work due to long nights of partying among working-class children could severely undermine the living standards of their families. Viewed from below, night-time entertainments, and leisure in general, represented a sphere of everyday life where conflict within the family was often centred, and where the burden of poverty and unemployment was sharply felt (De Koster, 2018). This was why a widow with five young children complained in 1913 about her eldest daughter Marie, who was 17 years old, that she "*is doing nothing but walking around until 1, 2, or 3 in the morning, not wanting to work and contributing nothing to the family income, and just hanging around in bars and cinemas instead of working (...) and thus I have already spent three years in sorrow and misery*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 364, 1913).

This point illustrates well that for working-class parents, although they often shared middle-class concerns about the sexual dangers for girls and the risks of debauchery and illegality for boys, the "youth and night issue" had distinct meanings and dimensions. The exercising of parental control answered their own specific needs and fears: collecting a sufficient family income to make ends meet. Another important conclusion is that much of the growing judicial repression against "unruly" Antwerp youths in the early twentieth century for venturing into nightlife too much was the work of nobody else but their own parents and relatives.

Youths' Uses and Experiences of Darkness in the City

For young working people, nightlife, movies, and social dancing became necessary pursuits in escaping the dull and often problematic reality of work and life; they took to these activities with a great appetite for fun. Young men dived into the nightlife in search of female company and a good time, while the urban night promised working girls a moment of freedom away from their family and work restrictions. They could escape to silent films or enjoy music and dancing with peers while these activities remained invisible to parents, relatives, and other adults from the local community, thereby avoiding the bad reputation and scandal that public visibility would provoke (Commachio, 2006; De Koster, 2018; Myers, 2006; Odem, 1995).

Such liberty and protection from gossip and scandal were, however, not guaranteed at night: young women had to guard them closely through caution and knowledge of the night-time city. While city streets and parks provided young women with important spaces for socialising during the daytime and evenings, both the meaning and use of those spaces for and by young women changed during the dark hours of the night, especially when moving outside of the few streets that made up their

own neighbourhoods, and moving alone. Girls were well aware of "dangerous" and "inappropriate" times, places, and codes of conduct on the street, not only because they were watched more closely than boys, but also because they were "street-wise" and had their own understandings of "appropriate" behaviour for a girl and their own senses of danger. Young women avoided walking alone in the streets, let alone in a park, at night: they were as much concerned about their own physical safety as their parents and moral reformers were and wanted to avoid being labelled as a prostitute by the police (De Koster, 2017). Similarly, they knew all too well that the relative tolerance of women in pubs and taverns concerned only the familiar, respectable tavern around the corner and not a venue of suspicious moral character, a distinction very sharply made by Antwerp citizens from the lower social groups (Vrints, 2019).

To avoid trouble when moving about in the city during the evening and night-time on their way to places of entertainment, girls made sure that they were accompanied. New in the early twentieth century, and reflecting a new sense of autonomy and identity amongst young women, was that they generally preferred not to be "chaperoned" by a male family member (older brother, nephew, father, etc.) (Sangster, 1995). As some juvenile court cases involving parent-daughter conflicts suggest, they only reluctantly accepted this when it was strictly imposed on them by their parents, as a condition for them to be allowed to go out. If they were allowed to choose themselves, they preferred to move around in the company of friends.

Drawing on their testimonies before the juvenile court or to the police, and similarly to what others have found for American, Canadian, and Australian teenage girls in the same period (Commachio, 2006; Peiss, 1986; Piper, 2010), young Antwerp women usually arrived and departed from the urban leisure scene in tightly knit groups of female friends. These women formed barriers against unwanted male sexual approaches while appearing more respectable than girls involved in streetwalking. While they flirted and danced with men at these functions, it was the friendship of other women that kept the working woman happy and safe on her way home to her family. At the same time, having female groups of friends allowed women and girls to escape conventional controls and helped them achieve a new sense of female autonomy; this group became crucial in girls' experience of social life in the city. When dealing with outgoing daughters, parents very often complained about the strong and pernicious influence of such "bad friends". And parents were not always wrong to be concerned by this, one 15-year-old girl admitted in 1925: "*Every time I stayed away from home, I was seduced by a friend of mine to go dancing, and after I had spent my wages on dancing, I didn't dare go home again*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 3099, 1925).

We saw earlier that for early twentieth-century working young people in Antwerp, night-time leisure mostly involved visits to the local cinemas and dance hall outings. The cinema was immensely important as a source of entertainment and escapism, and for working-class girls, films provided glimpses of romance and glamour in lives dulled by poverty and the burden of housework. The mother of 14-year-old Paula claimed in 1925 that her daughter was addicted to movie magazines and was constantly stealing money to buy new ones (Antwerp juvenile court, file 3089, 1925). Further, many of the movies expressed new values of heterosocial life. Working-class young people began to imitate and enact these new recreational mores in urban life; a more assertive sexual presence was met with enthusiasm by boys and girls alike (Commachio, 2006; Williams, 2001).

At weekends in working-class sections of Antwerp city, youngsters met and danced away the night. Though parents initially believed that dance halls were socially non-threatening environments for their children, the popularity of these dances (and the media that covered dance hall activities) informed the public of the true dance hall behaviour: late night, bawdy parties where young men and women gathered, socialised, and defied social propriety by smoking, drinking, cursing, and dancing dangerously close (Commachio, 1997; Piper, 2010).

Flirting and dancing with partners of the opposite sex became morally tricky, especially for young women. Yet, this negotiation was what made dance halls appealing for many working-class young people. Chances to intermingle with the opposite sex became increasingly popular as women began to test the limits of social acceptability through their bodies. As McBee puts it, "*for women, in particu-*

lar, dance meant the chance to define what were acceptable heterosocial relations and to challenge the conventional gender norms they confronted in their day-to-day lives" (2000, p. 83). While drinking and dancing inevitably led to prostitution in the minds of older adults, illegal sexual bartering was only a fraction of dance hall behaviour. Some working girls did engage in trading at night out on the town for sexual favours with their male escorts. However, the majority of female dance hall frequenters were neither involved in such practices *nor* prostitutes. They used their own criteria of "proper" female behaviour and respectability (De Koster, 2017, 2018).

A few indications in the sources suggest that working-class youths saw themselves as justified in pursuing night-time leisure in the dance halls and cinemas, embracing new virtues of self-reliance, independence, and the ability to choose their own fate. Some of these youngsters explicitly resisted attempts to curtail their leisure pursuits: 17-year-old Marie, for example, told the Antwerp juvenile judge in 1913 that "*on Sunday, mother locked my clothes in the wardrobe, I tore open the cupboard and took my clothes out*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 364, 1913). Lucienne, who was also 17, ran away from home only to return three weeks later, "*because I was never allowed to go out*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 4382, 1932). A 17-year-old young man from Rotterdam who was brought before the Antwerp juvenile court in July 1933 on charges of vagrancy had left home for the same reason and was not planning to return, when the police arrested him (Antwerp juvenile court, file 4497, 1933).

Running away from home was a way to assert autonomy for some; other youths were more explicit in resisting parental control and claiming their "right to the night". Amedée, a 16-year-old boy who, according to his mother, did nothing other than going to the movies and reading police novels, threatened: "*You just wait, once I am 21, I will decide for myself; I will let myself be recruited and disappear as a sailor, you will have brought that upon yourself*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 2992, 1924). Fifteen-year-old Anna was also clearly determined to do her own thing: even after multiple complaints from her parents, warnings by the juvenile judge, and having to spend some time in a reform school, she kept disappearing to the movies and dance halls two or three times a week (Antwerp juvenile court, file 2953, 1924). Seventeen-year-old Josephina made it even clearer: after the Antwerp juvenile judge had warned her that she risked being placed in a reform school, she said she was willing to improve her behaviour, but immediately added: "*I cannot, however, promise you I won't go out anymore, because it is impossible for a 17-year-old girl not to go out*" (Antwerp juvenile court, file 3018, 1925).

Conclusions

In early twentieth-century Antwerp, in a context of moral panic and attempts to discipline the urban poor, bourgeois elites attempted to direct working-class youths from "unwholesome" towards "appropriate" activities and spaces and to act against their "unworthy" parents. At the same time, Belgian authorities, like many other Western countries in this period, introduced new juvenile justice legislation. Next to the control of juvenile crime, a central concern was to repress a wide variety of "problem behaviours" exhibited by young people and shield them from the seductions and dangers of the night in particular. Importantly, our findings confirm those of other recent studies (Baldwin, 2002; Commachio, 2006; Wolcott, 2005) that, in practice, the regulation of youths' nightlife was shaped by other actors and concerns than bourgeois ones and was much more about informal negotiation and correction than about formal repression.

For police officers on site, often coming from working-class families themselves, controlling young wage earners at night was not about answering elites' calls for repression, but simply a part of their general desire to maintain order and peace in the city streets. The police dealt with most incidents involving young night owls informally, in the street, not bothering much about the youths' actual activities. In order to escape the police at night, young people simply had to refrain from getting involved in large-scale fights or causing disturbances in "quiet" streets, and girls in particular knew that they should move around the city safely surrounded by girlfriends.

Much more than the police, we found that parents and relatives played the most important role in reg-

ulating the nightlife of Antwerp working-class young people. Parents called in the judicial authorities to put an end to the nightly entertainment of their teenage children in cinemas and dance halls, usually after repeated attempts to resolve the issue on their own. More important, however, is the finding that although many working-class parents appeared to partially endorse bourgeois concerns about sexual dangers for girls (family reputation) and risky behaviour among boys, they tended to define the core of the "nocturnal youth problem" differently, in line with their own specific needs. Their main motive for intervening was to put an end to intense family conflicts and to keep the family economy in balance.

Despite police and parental controls, Antwerp working-class young people continued to take to the city streets during the evening hours and increasingly participated in the bustling, modern entertainment of the movies and the dance halls – which became the core of a new youth culture. Although our evidence is limited, a number of testimonies before the Antwerp juvenile court or to the police suggest that for them, nightlife was not about rebellion or protest, let alone deliberately creating nuisance or experiencing the "kick" of deviant behaviour. Young people shared and appropriated elements of the bourgeois respectability model and sometimes used practical knowledge of places and times to avoid that corresponding to elite views (for similar conclusions, see Vrints, 2019, p. 282). What the darkness of night offered them in the first place was the possibility of temporarily escaping the routine of everyday life and the pressure of traditional controls and prevailing norms. They enjoyed the pleasure of homosocial friend relationships and heterosocial flirting, of romance, music, dances, and new forms of body experience and intimacy. These nocturnal transgressions also gave young people a sense of belonging to that new generation of "modern youth" in search of their own, new social and sexual identity and lifestyle, of which only they knew the secret codes, language, and rituals.

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