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Emmanuelle Lallement, Aurélie Godet

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From Bal Masques to Masked Balls: Festivity in the Era of Social Distancing

Emmanuelle Lallement

Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis University, France

Translated and adapted by Aurélie Godet

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ABSTRACT

The lifting of the COVID-19-related lockdown was greeted cautiously in Paris on May 11, 2020. There was some tentative singing, drinks with friends at a nearby café, a few cameras to immortalize the moment. Yet, barely an hour after the beginning of this first phase of France's "deconfinement" plan, a small crowd of people gathered on the Champs Elysées to celebrate the ability to get out without a self-authorized written certification of their purpose. Nothing too exuberant, but still, seeing these residents gather in a public place that has welcomed so many Parisian festive gatherings said a lot about the general mood of the city. Like the *apéro Skype* trend to which French people had reluctantly given in, the event was flaunted as a powerful emblem of the confinement period.¹ Indeed, this text argues that social distancing has paradoxically revealed the role that festive sociability plays in our lives. In the era of protective and control measures (*gestes-barrières* in French), festivity has become all the more precious as it has been made almost impossible.

1. *Translator's note:* *Apéro* is short for *aperitif* (pre-dinner drinks). As this French tradition moved online during lockdown, a new ritual was born, that of the "apéro Skype" or "Skypéro" (a portmanteau word with the same meaning).

2. *Translator's note*: The concept of total social fact was introduced in the late 1960s by anthropologist Marcel Mauss (Émile Durkheim's nephew) to refer to an activity that affects the whole of society, including (but not limited to) the economic, legal, political, and religious spheres. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison, with an introduction by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

3. Emmanuelle Lallement, ed., "Éclats de fête," special issue, *Socio-anthropologie* 38 (2018). In this special issue of the French social anthropology journal, I focused on the recent fragmentation, recomposition, and reconfiguration of festivity, using the following question as a prompt: "Has festivity *in itself* disappeared?"

4. *Translator's note*: Launched in 2001, Nuits blanches, a contemporary all-night art festival, takes place annually in October across the city's streets and monuments. It is a free invitation to Parisians and tourists to engage with works of art by national and international artists.

5. Emmanuelle Lallement, "Événements en ville, événements de ville: Vers de nouvelles ritualités urbaines?," *Communication & Organisation* 32, no. 2 (2007): 2, https://journals.openedition.org/communicationorganisation/275#xd_co_f=NzE4N-WRIMzEtYjYyNS00N2YxLWFiZ-mltNDg4NjJlMjA2NzE0~.

6. For a stimulating discussion of this new proxemic "code," see Yves Winkin, "Viens loin de moi—

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Festivity as a social phenomenon stems from the universal need among humans to gather peacefully and joyfully. Anthropologists have variously interpreted it as a manifestation of our desire for excess, for time-out-of-time, and for social inversion. They have also presented it as a "total social fact" through which they may gain a better understanding of the social, religious, and economic dimensions of the communities they study.² Contemporary human societies are no strangers to the festive impulse, though they tend to use it as a lever for economic and cultural development rather than as an end in itself.³ Certain traditional celebrations like town fairs have certainly experienced revivals, but most festivals now tend to fit from the get-go into the scheme of urban, globalized modernity and of the competitive market for territorial identities. The result is a continuum of urban festivities that spans the entire globe. The French *fête de la musique* has been celebrated in New York since 2007 (as Make Music New York), the Parisian Nuits blanches festival has found an echo in Rome as the Notte Bianca, while the man-made beaches that line the banks of the Seine in summer now have their equivalent on the banks of the Garonne and Danube Rivers.⁴ In some ways, these new urban rituals may seem like poor substitutes for festivity.⁵ In fact, the landscape of revels recently overflowed with events that could be categorized as copies, imitations, or transfers; that had lost their initial meaning to reemerge as commercial events; or that had become institutionalized or politicized. Had true festivity dissolved into residual, "festive-like" rituals, then?

While anthropologists were busy analyzing this multiplication of festive proceedings and debating whether it was yet another sign of the slow, continuous decline of our societies into decadent postmodernity, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly lent credence to the hitherto inconceivable hypothesis of a future disappearance of festivity. After all, didn't it involve social mixing, physical proximity, rubbing elbows, haptic feedback?

In France, the void left by the state-mandated lockdown was acutely felt by many. Isolation and social distancing measures put a brutal, shocking stop to the festive sociability that punctuated our daily lives. Family gatherings, holiday celebrations, house parties, town fairs, ceremonies, receptions, charity fetes, festivals, etc.: the sudden cancellation of all these left gaping holes in our individual and collective calendars and revealed, through their very absence, how central they used to be to our daily lives. Even now that lockdown has been replaced with less stringent proxemic rules, festivity largely looks like "the ghost of times past."⁶

Festivity Unmasked via Social Distancing

In one of the great ironies of the pandemic, COVID partly spread via festive gatherings: one soccer game here, one religious service there, one celebratory meal elsewhere. Among the first measures taken by the Chinese government to limit the spread of the virus was the cancellation of New Year celebrations, which usually involve big family reunions and, consequently, domestic and international mobilities. The year of the Yang Metal Rat ended up beginning under the sign of a strict stay-at-home order. Soon, festivities got postponed or called off throughout the world: for an indefinite amount of time, there would be no more weddings or baptisms, no

big sports competitions, no concerts or shows of any kind, no neighborly gatherings or public entertainment. Starting on March 16th in France, and either earlier or later in other nations, forms of ordinary sociability ended overnight. Social distancing practices, ranging from the strictest, starkest of lockdowns to the forced *déconfinement* of certain work sectors deemed to be socially indispensable, including the small arrangements people regularly made with the laws, with others, and with their own consciences, would throw into stark relief the inequities of our societies.

Over the months that followed, as accepted spatial and temporal norms were challenged and the most ordinary social practices were redesigned, festivity became the locus of an emerging regime of sociability. New practices appeared and got tested in real time, as exemplified by these Italian neighbors clinking their prosecco glasses across their balconies using poles. Impeded sociability took various, original forms, all worthy of study. It also gave rise to a new set of questions for anthropologists: Could festive phenomena survive outside the traditional setting for festivity? Should the novel practices be considered as mere surrogates or as heralds of a new code of behavior? Studying the forms that festivity took when reduced to a minimum, were we not getting a preview of the future transformations and restructuring of our lives? What did these new festive forms, or rather these new festive sociabilities, reveal about who we were and our collective perceptions of gatherings, euphoria, dysphoria, technological devices, transgression, and order? Irrespective of the answers, the anthropological need for festivity that manifested itself at the heart of social distancing needed to be taken seriously. One needed to grasp what this death-defying festive pulse, or impulse, really meant.

Homemade Festive Sociabilities

By immediately putting a stop to any kind of gathering in public places, stores, sports arenas, and cultural sites, social distancing measures pushed all forms of festive sociability back into the domestic sphere. Except for clandestine underground parties in certain French cities, festivity largely took place at home in the months that followed lockdown. In compliance with the official statement that "staying at home" was "the easiest way to save lives," people largely stayed put and refrained from making contact with people other than their families, closest friends, and the occasional neighbor. With no access to large meeting grounds, festivities developed indoors, or in the in-between space of the balcony, porch, or patio. Families instituted new rituals, arranging, for instance, to meet for a few minutes of dancing or general blowing-off steam after working all day in separate rooms. At eight o'clock every night, the residents of apartment buildings in big cities stepped out on their balconies to give medical personnel a round of hearty applause. For people who often barely knew one other, these fleeting moments of conviviality were a welcome respite from the supposed anonymity of the urban environment. Sometimes the owners of adequate sound systems decided to switch the mood from simply pleasurable to truly festive by offering to play a few songs to which people might sing along or dance. Street life was temporarily transformed as a result, as it was now experienced from the vantage point of a gallery. The sonic public landscape was no longer dominated by the sound of cars, buses, crowds, and passers-by calling out to each other, and was laced instead with music, conversations between near-strangers, greetings from people one only caught a glimpse of usually. Down with the masks of indifference, everyone seemed to think when the time came to meet again on the balcony.

7. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1956).

8. *Translator's note: Burger Quiz* is a farcical French television game show created by actor Alain Chabat and Kader Aoun, first broadcast on Canal + from 2001 to 2002 before being replayed on Comédie! Channel from 2006. A new version of the show started in 2018 on the French channel TMC.

As toasting the neighbors across the street went from spontaneous gesture to habit, the “presentation of self” analyzed by sociologist Erving Goffman remained an object of careful management.⁷ People rarely got rolling drunk on their balconies. Still, this fleeting festive sociability gradually transformed our relationship to space and time as well as our interactions. It brought about a temporary, yet repetitive, synchronization of social life and introduced a new sense of expectation between citizens and their neighbors, akin to that which precedes a date. Maybe these shared moments would lead to acts of mutual assistance or to long-lasting friendships? People promised each other to have a drink together “in real life” and already scheduled dinners for “when this would be over.” The festive mood of these socially distanced gatherings pointed to the possibility of festivities in a not-too-distant, though constantly postponed, future.

Other pioneering forms of festivity grew online, out of professional videoconferencing software. When the first *apéros Skype* were organized in the early days of the French lockdown, inspired by the Italian precedent, they usually felt anomalous. For a start, nobody was a host any more, since everyone stayed home and provided their own food and drinks. Slowly, though, people started trading the names of the applications that would allow them to conform to the new ritual of the (over-)alcoholic evening online conversation. Mastering the use of Skype, Zoom, House Party, FaceTime, and other tools meant to bridge geographical distance became an obligation for people who missed the physical presence of others. The awkward patchwork of faces that adorned our screens formed a visual and sonic landscape with which it became possible to interact. While friends could be variously comfortable with these technologies of “proximity within distance,” it was within families that the digital literacy gap manifested itself most strongly (and comically). Who did not experience, say, a Skype family gathering in honor of a grandmother’s eighty-sixth birthday, only to see a dozen distorted faces against more or less fortunate backgrounds, cutting each other off every second due to their inability to grasp the subtleties of online communication and spending most of this virtual, gift-free birthday party marveling at technology, ranting on about disconnections, or tentatively livening up the conversation with emojis or screenshots?

From these initial, more-or-less-successful ventures, during which alcohol helped many overlook technological constraints, people gradually moved on to more elaborate dealings like themed parties in which participants offered to organize games and costume competitions. Some had a “Miss Lockdown” beauty pageant in which they tried to outdo one another in eccentricity using household items, while others competed in a *Burger Quiz* contest, using a Power Point on a shared screen.⁸ Yet others celebrated birthdays wearing wigs. The physical manifestations of exhilaration played a major role in this online festive theater: people kept clinking glasses with their screens, they laughed and sang, they performed skits, and sometimes they dozed off, worrying their friends as a result.

Shared screens actually became the new platform for renewed, sometimes exaggerated, conviviality. People performed for the benefit of others, believing that these interactions of a new kind should be as merry and spontaneous-looking as possible. The virtual festive spectacle that people gifted themselves often fed off the memories of past celebrations and evening parties. They conjured up images from “the world before.” *Apéros Skype* and other forms of “lockdown

9. *Translator's note:* Pioneered by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the term "extimacy"—a combination of the words "exterior" and "intimacy"—refers to intimacy as a function of public relation.

10. For the performances, see National French Orchestra, "Le Boléro de Ravel par l'Orchestre national de France," streamed live on March 29, 2020, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sj4pE_bgRQI; and "Symphonie confinée: La tendresse," streamed live on March 29, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEjvRktXeis>.

Translator's note: André Bourvil, known as just "Bourvil," was a French actor and singer who starred alongside Louis de Funès in some of the most famous French comedy films of the 1960s: *Le Corniaud* (1965) and *La Grande Vadrouille* (1966).

11. Paris Opera, "'Dire merci': Message de soutien du Ballet de l'Opéra national de Paris," streamed live on April 16, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OliG14G-gmu0>.

12. Sophie Poirot-Delpech, ed., "À travers l'éphémère," special issue, *Socio-anthropologie* 33 (2016), <https://journals.openedition.org/socio-anthropologie/1971#authors>.

entertainment" seemed suspended between yesterday and tomorrow. They hovered between a base of past festivities and a capital of uncertain future occasions.

In addition to modifying our relation to time, the health crisis modified our relation to space. Access to our usual gathering spots—such as our friends' apartments, cafés, night clubs, concert halls, cinemas, the streets themselves—was now prohibited; but we now had access to spaces we used to think of as out of reach. Fragments of private spheres, carefully curated extimacies were exposed to our prying gaze.⁹ Epidemic entertainment, broadcast via Facebook live and filmed in a kitchen, a living room, a bedroom, a personal studio, or an office, started to look like private, confidential, improvised concerts in front of a select audience: us. We were thus treated to various "confined symphonies," including a striking performance of Maurice Ravel's "Bolero" by the musicians of the National French Orchestra and a cover of Bourvil's "La Tendresse" by forty-five singers and musicians.¹⁰ Directly from the creator to the spectator, from the producer to the consumer, culture had never been so "(a)live." Its economic dimension was erased, or at least eclipsed, by a sudden willingness to replace commercial promotion with free access and benefaction. Concerts were literally "given," and recipients ranged from the usual fans to the general public, to select communities deemed worthy of gratitude. The dancers of the Paris Opera, for instance, paid tribute to healthcare workers by performing original dance steps along Sergueï Prokofiev's "Dance of Knights." The video, directed by French screenwriter Cédric Klapisch, was released along with the following message: "This film aims to show that whatever happens, we will continue dancing, living, and creating."¹¹

To a certain extent, the pandemic confirmed the growing centrality of screens in domestic space. It also transformed public space into many fragments of private space staged for the benefit of neighbors, family, and total strangers. It reaffirmed the significance of three of the basic components of festivity: music, dancing, and singing. It fostered a rebirth of creativity, if not really of the transgressive kind. Indeed, while the main locus of festivity theoretically allows all sorts of excess, homemade festivities remained tame and limited in time. Additionally, it testified to the shrinking of space in our globalized world, as dozens of artists from across the globe joined Lady Gaga for a "One World: Together at Home" online mega-concert. Finally, it corroborated the anthropological axiom that the suspension of ordinary routine plays a major role in festivity and rituals in general. For festivity to occur, there needs to be a specific place, a specific occasion, specific objects, and a return to normalcy once the glasses, the crisps, the instruments, and microphones have been put away and the computers and other screens put into sleep mode. The safety imperative was effectively internalized, though. "In contradiction with the descriptions offered by Jean Duvignaud and other anthropologists of festivity, it appears that the success of contemporary 'festive collectives' ... does not lie in the intermingling of beings but, quite the opposite, in the maintenance of a certain order and the abidance of social distancing. Things will go smoothly only if people stay in their place," sociologist Sophie Poirot-Delpech recently wrote in her introduction to an issue of the French journal *Socio-anthropologie* focused on short-lived collectives.¹² Current substitutes for festivity may thus end up modifying it, but as borderline cases of merrymaking, they also reveal the very logic and structure of festivity.

13. Emmanuel Ethis, "À propos de l'annulation des festivals: Quelles conséquences pour le public?," *Le SocioBlog d'Emmanuel Ethis* (blog), April 15, 2020, <http://ethis-e.blogspot.com/2020/04/a-propos-de-lannulation-des-festivals.html>.
14. Yves Winkin, "Propositions pour une anthropologie de l'enchantement," in *Unité-Diversité: Les identités culturelles dans le jeu de la mondialisation*, ed. Paul Rasse, Nancy Midol, and Fathi Triki (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), 177–86.
15. Victor Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 4 (December 1979): 468.

What Will Festivity Look Like in the "World After"?

It is now clear that festivals will not take place any time soon, despite their being "social occasions that punctuate the lives of people working in the cultural industries," as culture sociologist Emmanuel Ethis recently wrote on his blog.¹³ While festivals are primarily events, they also belong to regular social time, and the effects of their cancellation will have a profound impact on communities throughout the world, far beyond its effect on the cultural tourism industry. Festivals as events are not just festive parentheses. And festivity in general is never divorced from ordinary social life. It is one of its many possible forms.

Be that as it may, nobody knows what will happen "next": have not our festive rituals already evolved since the beginning of the lockdown? The fluid character of festivity in the era of social distancing will only mirror the fundamental impermanence that characterizes it. There will be numerous examples of creative activities designed to foster festive effervescence. New ideas on how to have fun, how to be psychologically together while six feet apart are already coming from all sides. The challenge of the next few months will be to rebuild relationships, to invent forms of social proximity that will not jeopardize protective measures. Festive forms will surely be a focus of this forced inventiveness, since their performative dimension will likely be central to the reconstruction of social life. From Belarus came the idea of placing cardboard cutouts of the faces of supporters on mannequins to create the illusion of crowded stands during soccer matches. In Germany, a startup came up with the idea of sending virtual applause and cheers (relayed via the stadium's PA system) through an application during games. *MeinApplaus.de* would effectively allow teams to play behind closed doors while making sure fans can demonstrate their support for their favorite players. In the "realm of the fake," the gamut of real-life interactions has paradoxically been enlarged.

Because it is both a promise and a source of worry for the days to come, festivity right now is mostly experienced as a projection. One imagines future family reunions, catching up with friends and family, while pondering a set of nagging questions: What will be authorized? What will be forbidden? What will be considered a transgression? What will be tolerated? How many people will be allowed in public places at the same time? What will festive practices look like exactly? How far will people need to stand from each other? Will "masked balls" replace crowded dance floors? Ordinary reflexivity on "how to celebrate" now seems to bedevil what used to seem spontaneous. In line with sociologist Yves Winkin's call to "engineer enchantment," festivity will need to be manufactured anew.¹⁴ What will be left of our small quarantine rituals is hard to say. Maybe their repetitive, codified force will give them a degree of autonomy that will endure their future success as traditions—unless these convivial moments of social synchronization are intrinsically *liminal* spaces, "subjunctive space/time" (Victor Turner)?¹⁵ In that case, they would merely amount to a suspension of the old order, an intermission, until something new materializes.

For now, festivity is biding its time. Someday it will put an end to the long social emptiness left by months of social distancing. It will be the unmistakable sign that life is returning to normal, or at least that social life is resuming. But, as explained above, there is no point pitting the drabness of everyday life against the effervescence of festivity. Festivity mirrors our societies and is informed by social norms. Consequently, not everybody will be in the mood to celebrate and festivity will

16. John Waller, *The Dancing Plague: The Strange, True Story of an Extraordinary Illness* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2009).

17. *Translator's note:* Iolanda Cristina Gigliotti, more commonly known as Dalida, was an immensely popular French singer and actress from the late 1950s to the 1980s. She committed suicide in 1987.

18. *Translator's note:* The original reads: "Entrez dans la danse / Voyez comme on danse / Sautez, dansez, embrassez qui vous voulez."

remain the social marker it used to be. Some will find ways of poaching exceptions from the range of new regulations and will undoubtedly take advantage of efforts made by others to free themselves of the rules and hereby satisfy their desire for fun. Others will control their every move and words so as not to appear too elated in times ill-suited to glee. Indeed, is it not indecent to wonder about the future of festivity when COVID-19 patients are hovering between life and death, when medical personnel throughout the world are still fighting to "flatten the curve," when people are economically and psychologically suffering from social distancing measures (think of the homeless quarantined outside, for instance)? Responsibility toward one's fellow-citizens and guilt over having both the means and time for leisure and the pleasures of festivity will probably carry as much weight as the need to create fleeting moments of insouciance and euphoria. Precisely because our current world is characterized by uncertainty and because what we are going through seems perpetually provisional, the ambivalence of festivity has never been so obvious: it defies as much as it structures our lives.

Epidemics and festivity form a strange couple. One may think of the "dancing plague" that occurred in Strasbourg in July 1518 when, in the midst of a famine, somewhere between fifty and four hundred people took to frenetic, unstoppable dancing for days, working themselves up in a trance. The diocese took it to be a ritual of possession, while the secular authorities debated whether to prohibit the dancing or to promote it as a form of therapy. This episode, well-known to medievalists, shook the city for two months and is sometimes seen as a precedent to today's rave parties. The city that suffered from these joyless displays was confined so as not to contaminate others and the lone Terpsichoreans were sent parading away.¹⁶

In late April, the residents of the 18th arrondissement of Paris witnessed a new sort of "choremania": a dozen residents took to the streets to dance to a song by Dalida.¹⁷ These urban bohemians braved the decree prohibiting gatherings in public places and organized an ephemeral street ball that was quickly broken up by the police. Taking place as it did, the day before the lockdown was lifted, this episode made the headlines and was largely seen as a provocation. From an anthropological perspective, it was more of an urban "micro-event" that punctuated life in the era of the pandemic and that might have been set to the words from a well-known French nursery rhyme: "Join the dance / See how we're dancing / Jump and dance / Kiss whoever you want."¹⁸ Far from having contaminated the rest of the population, such an urge to dance, occurring as it did in a context of health and social crisis, may now be seen as either an omen of a coming furor to party or as the signal of an impending victory of fear.

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AUTHOR BIO

Emmanuelle Lallement is professor of urban ethnography at Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis University's Institute for European Studies. She is also a member of the "Architecture, City, and Urbanism" research unit funded by the French National Research Center, and coordinates the "Re-thinking the Contemporary City" program at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Paris-Nord. Her ethnographic work has focused on Paris, festive events, commercial relations, and global mobilities. Her publications include *La Ville marchande: Enquête à Barbès* (Paris: Téraèdre, 2010) and *Paris, résidence secondaire* (Paris: Belin, 2013). More recently, she edited a special issue of the French journal *Socio-anthropologie* on the contemporary fragmentation of festivity ("Éclats de fête," 2018).

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