
The role of bouncers in creating inclusive/exclusive nightclubs

Christine Preiser*¹

¹Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law (MPICC) – Guenterstalstrass 73
79100 Freiburg, Germany

Abstract

Nightclubs carry the notion of carnivalesque, liberal spaces in which people are able and allowed to loosen control from daily constraints, experiment with identities, and be who they really are or want to be. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they are unregulated spaces, as a set of informal rules (besides from legal regulations) apply and are enforced by bouncers and revellers. Nightclubs are far more than places of il/licit consumption: Here one can meet old or soon to be friends, spend time together and have a good time. This is why the entrance of the nightclub is a highly emotional place for bouncers and guests alike, as the denial of access is also a decision of cutting off persons from a form of sociability.

I have conducted ethnographic research about bouncers in three nightclubs in two German cities and will present parts of this research in my talk. I will show how certain groups of people are more affected by regulatory practices and the uncertain decision about access. I will show that this applies for (1) people in general who are new to the place, who are not familiar with the rules inside, the subtle codes of conduct (and dress), and the appropriate places for certain practices. It applies for (2) particularly males from migrant minority groups and/or of working class background who are more easily labelled as suspicious by bouncers and patrons. Of course, certain groups fall in both categories.

I will use one of the three nightclubs as a case study as it is frequented by a far higher number of international tourists and residents than the two other nightclubs. I will analyse the multi-layered process of inclusion/exclusion and regulation, which has always been part of the nightly routines of the bouncers on site but has gained new attention (also among the bouncers) in the last two years and confronts the bouncers with new (old) conceptual questions: Is there a right to party? (How) Can people learn to party appropriately? How much effort are nightlife participants ready to invest in this process? I will show how bouncers navigate through language barriers, reflections of their own biased vision, and conflicting expectations from revellers to create an inclusive space for many and exclusive space for some. I will also show how this process is affected shortly by higher numbers of new residents but then gets back to normal after a while.

I will conclude, that the process of inclusion/exclusion has gained more attention through a higher number of migrants in the past two years which has affected nightclubs, too. But the issues that they bring with them feed into the nightly routines of bouncers, especially in those places who are already used to a versatile clientele.

Keywords: bouncers, night, time economy, exclusion, leisure

*Speaker