



Rituals During Lockdown: The “Clap for our Carers” Phenomenon in France

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Come citare / How to cite

NOVELLO PAGLIANTI, N. (2020). Rituals During Lockdown: The “Clap for our Carers” Phenomenon in France. *Culture e Studi del Sociale*, 5(1), Special issue, 315-322.

Disponibile / Retrieved from <http://www.cussoc.it/index.php/journal/issue/archive>

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Articolo pubblicato online / Article first published online: June 2020



- Peer Reviewed Journal



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Note of Editor-in-Chief

This is the first Special issue of the journal *Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc*. The idea behind the special issue comes from this consideration: around the world, individuals are facing a critical moment, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences require some reflections on many topics, often forgotten by scholars. This is the reason why many Italian and foreign scholars have been invited to give their contribution. Furthermore, now more than ever, it is crucial to share knowledge coming from multiple disciplines and that's why it was decided to write an entire issue in English.

For scientific and intellectual correctness, the contents of single articles refer to the situation as in mid-May 2020. It is necessary to clarify that because this Special issue was published when many countries were starting to reduce their emergency measures to cope with the pandemic.

Rituals During Lockdown: The “Clap for our Carers” Phenomenon in France

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Abstract

The article will analyse the emergence of the applause for health workers to health personnel, a practice widespread in France since the first day of lockdown. We examine the meaning of this ritual that was first promoted on the web and then adopted by the social actors themselves in the semi-private space of windows and balconies. We will investigate the relationships and the meaning of this practice both on the web and in the social space.

Keywords: applause, ritual, community, clap for our carers

Introduction

The unusual period we are now facing brings out several issues that, on closer inspection, are not new after all, but they seem to reappear more directly on the social scene.

The health crisis caused by the Covid-19 virus makes us rethink, directly or indirectly, the social organization on which the various states have based their functioning: from education to work, from trade to social life. Victor Turner (1993 [1986], p. 19. Personal translation) points out that: “through calamities, we can examine the functioning of the crucial principles of the social structure and their relative preponderance at particular later moments”. During a crisis, we can reflect on the importance of certain social ties which perhaps appear less evident in so-called “normal” situations. These times bring out the basics of conflicts and interests, clearly showing their meaning.

This health crisis sees the emergence of new forms of sociality which at first appear as one of the many solidarity initiatives announced by the media: restaurants providing meals to health care workers in hospitals, teachers going to students’ homes to help them, grocery shopping for people with mobility or physical difficulties, cooking for sick neighbours, bakeries preparing cakes decorated with supporting sentences for front-line workers, etc. These are, in general, concrete acts carried out with the specific aim of helping less equipped and disadvantaged or at-risk people. Indeed, as the sociologist Francois Dubet (2020) maintains, the health pandemic further increases existing social inequalities, so that the lockdown brings out those “petites inégalités¹” exacerbating the competition between social classes. “Le pouvoir ignore les plus fragiles²”, claims the economist Michaël Zemmour (2020), who sees the French state’s support for companies and workers as a major exclusion of the unemployed and more generally of the precariat.

In this article, we will analyse a contemporary example characterising an impor-

¹ “Those small inequalities”.

² “Power ignores the most fragile”.

tant aspect of “making community”: the applause rising every evening at 8 p.m. from the balconies or windows of French houses.

We will start with this small gesture, which remains minimal compared to the greater acts of solidarity mentioned above, and yet with its own merits. First, it raises the question of its definition: what is it? Is it a ritual? Is it a practice? Is it an individual or collective gesture? This poses a problem from the very beginning. The second interesting aspect is its continuity or stability. From its onset until today, this gesture is punctually repeated, suggesting that it may well possess a “common sense” in C. Geertz’s meaning of “a relatively organized set of pondered thought” (1988 [1983], p. 93). A third issue is that it hails from social networks. It is difficult to pinpoint its specific origin (which, as we shall see, is not its most relevant aspect) but it remains a worldwide event that says more about the human nature than about our cultural differences.

1. Clapping for who and for what: the French context

This initiative appeared for the first time in Italy, as one of the first countries in Europe in which lockdown measures were drastically applied (24 February 2020). Since the first day, the initiatives supporting health workers have multiplied. The Facebook group “Applaudiamo l’Italia” (Clap for Italy) promoted a round of applause from people’s homes on March 14, after the success of the day before – a musical moment at 6 p.m., the closing time of the few food stores open and before the evening bulletin reporting the number of contagions and victims. Hashtag as “#Iorestoacasa” (I stay in, the Italian equivalent of the British #StayingInSavesLives), “#Grazieallefamiglie” (thanks to the families) set events such as the choirs on the national holiday (April 25th) or those of May 3rd at 6 p.m. with the aim of applauding the common effort to stay at home, etc.

The applause seems to be contagious and spread abroad. In France, the hashtag #on applaudit³ has conveyed the spread of this phenomenon. From the first day of lockdown the date was set daily for 8 p.m. Clémentine Autain (2020), member of the left-wing party “France Insoumise”, encouraged the State to “dégager urgemment des moyens inédits pour notre système médical⁴”. MEP Raphaël Glucksmann and numerous other political figures have also encouraged the population to join this unprecedented movement of solidarity. “Dire notre reconnaissance, notre admiration et notre soutien à celles et ceux qui bravent le danger, la fatigue, le manque de moyens pour nous soigner⁵” is, according to R. Glucksmann, the ultimate meaning of this collective gesture⁶.

The press has not been indifferent to the phenomenon. Since the official start of the French lockdown (17 March at 12 noon), the media have taken an interest in this initiative.

For example, on March 18th “Le Figaro” wrote: “Applaudissement au balcon en plein jour: un nouveau lien entre voisins⁷”, referring to the changeover to daylight saving time and therefore to the light characterizing the evening applause. The LCI

³ We find the same hashtags in several countries, such as #restezchezvous, #jerestechezmoi, #jerestealamaison, #ensemblealamaison.

⁴ “Urgently release exceptional means for our health system”.

⁵ “Express our gratitude, our admiration, our support to those that brave the danger, the fatigue, the lack of resources to care for us”.

⁶ For both quotations, see LCI Editorial Board (2020, March 18).

⁷ “Applause from balconies in broad daylight: a new bond between neighbours”.

television channel, belonging to the TF1 group, dedicated a special edition to this practice entitled “La France des balcons⁸” (March 22nd) illustrating this new experience that shows a united and supportive French people. From 18 to 30 March 2020, from the national press such as *Le Progrès*, *Le Nouvel Obs*, *Les Echos*, the *Huffington Post*, to the specialist press such as *Challenges*’ and the regional press such as *La Dépêche*, *La Nouvelle République*, *Ouest-France*, all the newspapers are reporting the same event: a gesture of solidarity for our health workers.

If this gesture seems to have a general meaning, the reasons given by the people interviewed by the newspapers are broad: “On se demande comment ils tiennent. J’applaudis aussi pour tous ceux qui ont perdu quelqu’un dans cette épidémie. Une chose est sûre, ne faudra pas les oublier après⁹” or “On n’a pas hésité à le faire, en se disant que si on commençait, cela entraînerait le mouvement de la résidence. A deux, on se motive, et ça fait plus de bruit. Dans nos familles respectives, nous avons des infirmiers et personnels de la grande distribution qui vont travailler. On applaudit pour eux, bien sûr, et pour tous les autres¹⁰”, writes *La Nouvelle République* (2020, April 11). “Merci de nous sauver¹¹”, writes *La Dépêche*.

Figures such as doctors and nurses are seen as heroes of the moment but “déjà fatigués, déjà atteints, déjà... alors que la situation, elle, va durer encore de longues semaines¹²” tells Madeleine Lhote (2020, March 28), doctor at the *Maison de Santé Pluriprofessionnelle* in Paris, to the *Huffington Post*.

Charlie Hebdo’s cartoonist Vuillemin (2020, March 27) drafts ironic cartoons on the risks of looking out onto the balcony without falling and *Mediapart*, a news website, is one of the rare voices against this gesture of global support (Portais 2020, March 23). They question the meaning of the applause that represents support for the health workers’ sense of sacrifice, given that both the lack of funding and the privatization of the health system have been going on for several years now. The “heroes in white suits¹³”, as the President of the Republic E. Macron calls them, are those who suffer budget cuts by the current government.

In any case, applause, an ephemeral and precarious gesture, is a subject worthy of amateur videos on microblogging such as Twitter to which the accounts of official institutions such as the *Necker Hospital* in Paris (@hopital_Necker) or the *Assistance Publique-Hopitaux de Paris* (@AP-HP) respond with thanks for their support to health care workers. On YouTube, one can find videos and songs made by medical staff to thank for the solidarity that emerged from the evening applause¹⁴.

A Facebook page entitled “Applaudissons nos services publics de santé¹⁵” has been created and promoted to encourage participation in this daily appointment.

To conclude this brief media review, television networks have dedicated short stories to the applause. National television channels (*France TV*, *France 3*, *France bleu*) showed the extent of the phenomenon. From Paris to Marseille, passing

⁸ “The France of Balconies”.

⁹ “We wonder how they’re holding up. I also applaud everyone who lost someone in this epidemic. One thing’s for sure, we mustn’t forget them later”.

¹⁰ “We did not hesitate to do it, telling ourselves that if we started, we would create a whole movement within our building. Two people get motivated and make more noise. In our respective families, we have nurses and other key workers. We applaud for them and for everyone else”.

¹¹ “Thanks for saving us”.

¹² “Already tired, already affected, already ... but the situation will last for many more weeks”.

¹³ Statement by Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on the COVID-19 epidemic, delivered on 12 March 2020. The full text is available at <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/273869-emmanuel-macron-12032020-coronavirus>

¹⁴ For example, the song www.youtu.be/frUwIFaXZGw

¹⁵ “Clap for our public health services”.

through Caen and Lyon, France looks out the window to applaud, sing, shout, make music with improvised instruments such as pots and ladles, or with guitars, pianos, violins and wind instruments and percussions. DJs, singers, entertainers, and musicians encourage musical moments shared between terraces and windows.

From its official website, the Municipality of Nice (2020) openly spurs its inhabitants to show up at the balcony: “À 20h, on vient applaudir! Rendez-vous sur vos balcons et à vos fenêtres pour applaudir ensemble celles et ceux qui sont mobilisés pour le bien de tous¹⁶”, a gesture of collective support towards health workers.

2. Applause as a contemporary ritual

Having understood that, ephemeral though it may be, this applause is for the time being firmly installed in social practices, let us try to understand its meaning. To answer our first question, if the applause was a real ritual, we will start by mentioning the meaning that Kertzer (1989) attributes to it: “a set of formalized, expressive acts, bearers of a symbolic dimension inserted in a specific space-time and using objects, languages, signs, systems of behaviour whose meaning is recognized within the group”. As M. Segalen points out, we are now talking about profane rites that can be found especially outside of work, in leisure time, sports activities and performances, commemorations, political and initiation rites. Following Bessin (2002) “La ritualisation s'accommode en effet du changement social, car les sociétés qui se transforment renouvellent les manières de marquer des moments forts et d'entériner des différences¹⁷”. In our society, applause is found in ceremonies that are sometimes part of more complex rituals that mean approval, acclamation, collective support for someone or something. In any case, applause underlines a common and shared consensus. This dimension of sharing seems to be the symbolic force of this gesture. Individuals are united for a collective cause that is supported by a larger whole. It is no coincidence that, in politically motivated demonstrations by the opposition, applause is excluded except for electoral rallies – showing, once again, agreement. After all, applause expresses the collective dimension by appearing as a non-verbal, transgenerational and intercultural sign of direct expression of an otherwise silent consensus. From the small approval to the more global ovation, what is reinforced is a group cohesion, a unity that is created thanks to the unison reproduction of the same gesture. There is no need for specific symbols of recognition or belonging, but simply of the body, a primary sign of so-called “natural” equality.

For its social aspect, we are interested in the boundary zone – the threshold, if we follow Van Gennep's (2012 [1909]) ritual structure in which the ritual can be divided into rites of separation, passage, and aggregation. Applause as an aggregative rite, a sign of belonging to a community, shows its public dimension: looking out the window or balcony. People confined in their own home show themselves in their private sphere which becomes public the moment they appear on the edge of their private space, on their threshold (as when the door of the house opens). The moment we show ourselves outside together, we make ourselves visible to our neighbours, to the small community around us. The applause is mostly performed

¹⁶ “Clapping at 8 p.m. Rendezvous at the balconies and windows to clap for those striving for the good of all”.

¹⁷ “The rite goes hand in hand with social change because societies that continue to evolve renew the ways of highlighting important moments and of consolidating differences”. Personal translation.

either in the inner courtyards between neighbours or outwards, towards the street as a public space. The importance of visibility is typical of the characteristics of the ritual. As in theatre: “a drama is not really complete until it is staged, *i.e.* acted on some kind of stage in front of an audience” (Turner, 1993 [1986], p. 83). Showing up at the appointment, even though it can be interpreted as a form of social control, suggests the need to appear as a part of a community and, therefore, confirm one’s own existence and being recognized as an individual.

3. Individual presence as a moment of sharing

Our second question concerned the continuity of this action. Why, after two months, do we still meet every night with people we may no longer see? Because every day one meaning of the ritual is tacitly renewed: the sharing that remains a collective dimension and not an individual one. Each person will interpret the gesture of applause with their own meanings, but the shared meaning is the will to mean together, to speak, to exchange a greeting, a gesture. It is no coincidence that the applause has created friendships, basic conversations, acquaintances, and flirtations. When the life-stage becomes a private balcony, people show themselves as they can and as they want – *impromptu* concerts, unsuspected singing skills, aperitifs between balconies, community dinners between windows, etc. After all, not everyone lives in front of a hospital, the ultimate and true recipient of applause. Few health workers will hear it, but they will know it is going to happen. The intention is worth more than the gesture, as they say...

We wonder, therefore, if, after all, we are applauding a bit also for ourselves, so as not to miss these rare moments of collective encounter that give meaning, albeit differently, to the various societies.

We must not forget that “rite, carnival, drama, show, have in common a temporal structure that interweaves constant and variable characteristics and gives space to improvisation and spontaneous invention during each performance” (Turner, 1993 [1986], p. 82).

The ritual, therefore, allows for variations: all kinds of music, disguises, musical and other instruments, dances, and sports. The structure of the ritual is given by its beginning, by its call often made with a bell or a stadium horn that places individuals in the temporality of the ritual, the beginning of something. The end is left to the dissolution of the ritual, to the return to private space, but with the awareness that the next day will be repeated. One should not underestimate the performative force of the ritual in implementing something unique but at the same time reassuring for its repetitive dimension. The neuropsychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik (2020) recalls it in this period of lockdown: “Depuis que les êtres humains sont sur Terre, ils font des sépultures, ils font des rituels du deuil. Toutes les cultures en ont, et là on sera obligés de ne plus en faire¹⁸”.

¹⁸ Interview on radio *France Inter*, 25/03/2020. “Since humans have been on Earth, they have been practising burials and performing rituals to overcome their loss. All cultures have them, but now we cannot do them anymore”.

4. From social networks to everyday life

This phenomenon seems to gather significant proportions at international level. As for previous years, on 5 May (2020) the “Giving Tuesday”, an international fundraising campaign to finance social causes, was organized and promoted on Twitter, aimed at expressing solidarity with various causes. Giving one’s time, commitment, money or labour all the expressions proposed for this initiative. Created by the UNF (United Nations Foundation), this event has spread throughout Canada and Europe. The hashtag #GivingTuesday followed by the initials of the European country participating in the initiative has been a major online trend during this period¹⁹. In France, several organizations have mobilized to contribute to hospitals and health facilities in support of the health workers in view of the Covid-19 emergency. The hashtag #Vousêtesformidables was highly popular on Twitter.

Responses of thanks and solidarity from the health sector were not long in coming: the Fondation Hopitaux de Paris, the Hospitalier Centres of the city of Béziers, the FEHAP (Fédération du secteur privé solidaire en Santé), Médecins du Monde, Centre Hospitalier de Genève/ Annecy, the Ligue against cancer, Alzheimer Recherche, etc. In all, more than 350 solidarity initiatives have taken place in the French country.

On the same date, the World Health Organization also launched the #SafeHands Challenge: an invitation to a worldwide applause at midday to thank health workers and recognize their fundamental role in hygiene and prevention²⁰.

Contemporary Street Art artist Banksy donated a pencil drawing titled “Game changer” to the Southampton Hospital in England, a facility particularly affected by the spread of the virus. A few words from the artist accompany the gift “Thank you for everything you do. I hope that this drawing will illuminate this place even if it is in black and white”.

All these episodic forms of solidarity have one thing in common: their creation and diffusion online. What role do social networks play in the construction of the applause? First, we see the creation of the phenomenon online: people publish an initiative, others propose it and spread it, and so on and so forth. In any case, these processes are given meaning by the individuals powering them. Other similar phenomena have appeared in previous years: such as the “Facebook aperitifs”, organized in 2010 via the social networks that have seen European squares invaded by young people with bottles of alcohol until late at night²¹. Our focus here is in the discussion of these events on social networks and their concretization in a well-defined space: the real public space (or semi-private, in the specific case of the applause). In a contemporary society in which “one to one” (Cardon, 2019) communications are not only about the private sphere and “one to many” communications are no longer only about the public sphere, an osmosis is now operating between the two realities. The values and cultural codes of these two realities, networked or not, are now in dialogue and in continuous definition. Individuals extend their *self* without radically differentiating between that which belongs to the network and that which concerns daily action.

¹⁹ 2020 saw the participation of England, France, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Denmark, Poland, etc.

²⁰ We will also mention the Italian applause promoted on Facebook by the group “Applaudiamo l’Italia” (Clap for Italy) on March 14, 2020, which prompted people to clap from their balconies at 12 noon for health care workers. Over 300.000 people joined the group proposing flashmobs, performances, flags *tricolore* and singing from their windows or roofs.

²¹ See N. Novello Paglianti, 2016.

Individuals who are members of a community also belong to others, perhaps virtual ones, but they invest in these “weak” (*i.e.* virtual) ties as much as in face-to-face ones. As Casilli (2010, p. 227) claims, “un ‘équilibre s’installe entre les liens forts et réels et les liens faibles et virtuels, chargés de la même intensité”. The aim of the social actor is to preserve her social capital, which is expressed in different ways, both concrete and virtual. Free access and participation seem to have become synonymous, where the former is often used instead of public, visible, and participatory. This also explains the diffusion and impact of internet-born initiatives in the everyday public space. What is the difference between launching an appeal online, promoting it on the streets and then publishing it online? A line of continuity seems to be built that does not prevent the citizen from living among these different spaces. Especially in a situation of imprisonment like the one caused by the current health crisis, the complementarity between these public and virtual realities is even less felt. All it takes is a video, a photo, a message, and the visual joins us with other realities in which we can participate indirectly. Everyone can show “her own” applause, creativity, invention based on a gesture that finds meaning in a shared collective and cultural basis. Furthermore, applications such as Instagram and Snapchat favour the sharing of images of oneself and nourish the exchange between private space and public dimension.

Showing oneself physically at the window to express the same gesture as one’s neighbours is a sign of existing, of being here, of presence at a time when real visibility is little affirmed and above all little confirmed by the Other. We do not meet, nor we see each other, and only in a few moments the presence of the alter ego allows a collective confirmation of social existence. As Dacheux (2008, p. 76) claims: “les médias contribuent néanmoins, et fortement, à l’élaboration des perceptions culturelles communes”.

Conclusions

In France, the lockdown was lifted on 11 May 2020. The start of phase two allowed the free movement of people and meetings with families and friends (within a 100 km radius) resumed their “natural” course. In regions still considered at risk²², restaurants and bars remain closed. The phenomenon of applause has decreased but continues to be discreetly felt through urban chaos. Collective, face-to-face meetings have resumed their role: mutual recognition of social actors, exchange and “community building”. The recovery of wider and diversified interactions reduces the importance of that gesture that made the individual feel part of a neighbourhood collective. People regain the possibility to choose their social interactions and take up those they have built and in which they have invested over the years.

It should not be forgotten that the applause remains linked to the world of the stage and show business in general. In a society where spectacularisation and self-valorisation have now become the norm, the individual is aware of participating in yet another representation of seeing and being seen, as E. Goffman would say. No one questions the gesture of solidarity for a noble purpose in this health crisis. The hope is that this apparent solidarity is not only a pretext behind which once again to

²² Four regions are considered in the “red” zone due to their high number of contagions: Ile de France, Alsace, Borgogne-Franche-Comté e Hauts- de France.

just express oneself, but a conscious appreciation of the health risk caused by the epidemic.

A final relevant aspect of this phenomenon is the recipient of the message: the health workers. The applause is addressed to a social category of actors that remains abstract but united in their work and at different levels on care. Is this a manifestation of trust in the institution? Or in the value of a group? The next few months will provide some answers....

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