

The Growth of the Rave Culture in Britain since the 1980s

Sensationalism, Liberation and Progression

Mike Thompson

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Supervisor: Holger Nehring

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Note:

‘Rave’ culture, as referred to in this piece, refers to the ‘acid house’ culture that emerged in the late 1980s, which later evolved into ‘rave’ and is now generally termed ‘club culture’. It is characterised by communal dancing to amplified electronic music for extended periods of time and is associated with - but not limited to – people who follow ‘alternative’ lifestyles and use illegal drugs. Raving occurs both in an underground and mainstream context; in the former, it generally manifests itself in disused spaces and remote locations as ‘free parties’, in the latter, it is found in licensed clubs, bars, and festivals *etc.* Though the culture has been wrongly described as ‘apolitical’, it is associated with ideas that are alien to our prevailing political system like social idealism and psychedelic consciousness, thus it constitutes a form of ‘everyday politics’ as described by Riley *et al.*¹

Citations:

After the initial citation, each source has been shortened to include only a short version of the title and the page number where appropriate. All cited works appear in full in the bibliography.

For example:

P. Walsh, *Gang War: The Inside Story of the Manchester Gangs* (London, 2003), p. 78.

will thereafter be cited as:

Gang War, p. 78.

¹ S.C.E. Riley, C. Griffin, Y. Morey, “The Case for ‘Everyday Politics’: Evaluating Neo-tribal Theory as a Way to Understand Alternative Forms of Political Participation, Using Electronic Dance Music as an Example”, *Sociology* 44:2 (2010), pp. 345-363.

Some relevant extracts that will perhaps help frame the interpretation that follows:

“Reaganisation, Thatcherisation, or whatever other label you attach to the brazen capitalism we have experienced during the last two decades, promotes greed as a virtue and propagates perverted notions of a non-cooperative individualism.”

P. Tagg, “From refrain to rave”, *Popular Music* 13, No. 2, p. 3.

“The very notion of the ‘collective’, of the common good, has been eroded by the self-serving agendas of the powerful – their greed and hunger for still more power. Throughout the world decades of conservative social policy have undermined any sense of mutual responsibility and placed the burden of risk squarely on the individual.”

B. Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (London, 2007), p. 254.

“The most strongly enforced of all known taboos is the taboo against knowing who or what you really are behind the mask of your apparently separate, independent and isolated ego.”

A. Watts, *The Book On The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (London, 1966), p. 15.

“The drug taking of young people is only understandable as part of their cultural response to the rapidly deteriorating conditions within which they create a social life for themselves.”

F. Coffield., L. Gofton., *Drugs and Young People* (Institute for Public Policy Research: London, 1994), p. 8.

“Part of the received culture of taking Ecstasy is that it is a great leveller. That is, the feelings of happiness, contentment and empathy combine on the dance floor with the feelings of high energy to dissolve the traditional boundaries separating classes, sexes and ages.”

R. Hammersley, F. Khan, J. Ditton, *Ecstasy and the Rise of the Chemical Generation* (London, 2002), p. 37.

“A rave was always about community, joining you to the four or five friends who made up your carload, to the ten or twenty cars that realised they were all heading the same way, to the hundreds of thousands of people who shared a dance beat... shared an experience of communion like no one had before.”

Unsourced Quote, *Ministry of Sound*, October 1998.

“It could be about... the simple bliss of dancing, environmental awareness, race relations and class conflict, the social repercussions of the drug economy, changing gender relations, re-asserting lost notions of community – all stories that say something about life in the nineties.”

M. Collin, *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House* (London, 1997), p. 5.

In recent years, British newspapers have chronicled the ‘return’ of the underground rave culture, while an increasing amount of print has been dedicated to the debate on drug reform.² Such developments are representative of a shift in attitudes; it was only last year that two million tuned in to witness the first televised experiment involving illegal drugs.³ What academics have been telling us for decades – that youthful drug use has become normalised – is slowly and awkwardly being dealt with by the popular press. These developments have coincided with a decline in political participation and what some have termed a crisis of “democratic legitimacy” in Britain. A study in 2005 identified “a strong sense of political *alienation* rather than political apathy” as the reason for low voter turnout; the system is regarded as “self-serving, unrepresentative and unresponsive” to young people’s needs.⁴ In 1994, a British think-tank suggested that “we adults could do with a fundamental change in our attitudes towards this age group”, who “are asking to be to be treated as intelligent, responsible individuals, rather than irresponsible hooligans or moral imbeciles who have to be told what to do and what not to do”.⁵ The continued ignorance of such advice has increasingly led young people to base their opinions upon their own lived experience, as the official sources of information have proved unhelpful and misleading.

This self-serving behaviour is in fact typical of the British establishment. The dismissal of Professor David Nutt (a world-renowned expert in the field of psychopharmacology) from his role as chairman on the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) is an example of such official absurdity. In 2007, Nutt and his team produced a harmfulness index that rated alcohol and tobacco above cannabis, ecstasy and many other illegal drugs. These findings, published in the peer-reviewed medical journal *Lancet*, ruffled some feathers within government and revitalised the drug debate.⁶ In 2009, Nutt penned another article, comparing the relative harms of ecstasy and horse-riding. Using this extreme example to demonstrate the senselessness of our current policy, Nutt concluded that society “does not adequately balance the relative risks of drugs against their harms”.⁷ The Home Office responded by removing Nutt from government. The then Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, later said: “what you cannot have is a chief adviser at the same time stepping into the political field and campaigning against government decisions”, confirming that political considerations are above science.⁸ This decision prompted the resignation of a further six eminent scientists from the ACMD, confirming the lack of confidence in the government’s approach. Given the kind of

² M. Townsend, “Return of underground rave culture is fuelled by the recession and Facebook”, *The Observer*, 07/11/2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/nov/07/underground-rave-culture-recession-facebook>, accessed 20/02/2013.

³ *Drugs Live: The Ecstasy Trial*, Jon Snow and Dr Christian Jessen (Channel 4, 26/09/2012).

⁴ M. Henn, M. Weinstein and S. Forrest, “Uninterested Youth? Young People’s Attitudes towards Party Politics in Britain”, *Political Studies* 53 (2005), pp. 574.

⁵ F. Coffield, L. Gofton, *Drugs and Young People* (Institute for Public Policy Research: London, 1994), pp. 34-36.

⁶ R. Highfield, “Alcohol ‘is more dangerous than ecstasy’”, *The Telegraph*, 23/03/2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/science-news/3352286/Alcohol-is-more-dangerous-than-ecstasy.html>, accessed 18/03/2013.

⁷ D. Nutt, “Equasy – An overlooked addiction with implications for the current debate on drug harms”, *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 23 (2009), pp. 3-5.

⁸ “Government drugs adviser resigns”, *BBC News*, 01/11/2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8336635.stm, accessed 19/03/2013.

blatant truth-suppression that characterises the Nutt incident, it is perhaps not surprising that many have become disaffected. The substantial increase in illegal drug use in this country over the past thirty years serves only to underline how detached from reality government policy has been.

This piece will focus chiefly on the content of British press articles from the 1980s to illustrate how rave culture has been presented to newsreaders and also to demonstrate its significance in countering the impact of mass unemployment. Taking into account newspapers that represent views across the political spectrum, some clear differences have been noted. For example, papers like *The Sun* and the *News of the World* have traditionally published attention-grabbing stories, typified by a moralistic standpoint and sensationalist claims. These stories are, in many cases, supported by misinformation. This tradition is still alive today. In January 2013, the *Mirror* published the headline: 'Killer pills: Lethal batch of super strength ecstasy blamed for deaths of FIVE young people'.⁹ Despite many scientific studies confirming the low-risk associated with MDMA use, this article emphasises that there is a clearly identified threat of death posed to young people. The young people involved actually died from the harmful chemical PMMA, *not ecstasy* and not what they wanted to consume.¹⁰ It is probable that some of the deaths attributed to ecstasy in the past may have been caused by PMMA, a substance used by dishonest pill-pressers to widen profit margins.¹¹ Considering the huge demand for MDMA, perhaps it would be in the public interest for newspapers to lobby the government to take control of the drug supply and take care of its citizens, rather than peddling unhelpful stories to sell more papers. This kind of reporting has done little more than mislead the public and prevent a serious debate about drug reform from taking place, further demonstrating the absurdities both within the British press and the legal system. While not completely avoiding sensationalist reporting, newspapers like the *Observer* and the *Guardian* have tended to offer a variety of perspectives on the key issues. Where right-wing tabloids have applied a negative reductionist approach, a more complex narrative is discerned from the centre-left newspapers, where there is even some engagement with the positive aspects of rave culture. In 1994, the *Guardian* published an article entitled 'Home Office drugs report backs raves'.¹² A serious debate about the adequacy of the laws relating to mass illegal party culture and the associated problems was introduced, with recommendations made toward harm prevention policies and decriminalization of some drugs.

The press articles have been studied alongside secondary literature on rave from a variety of perspectives; books from key cultural actors have been consulted in addition to academic journals from various disciplinary backgrounds. This literature overwhelmingly suggests that the rave culture has been a misunderstood phenomenon; indeed, some have gone so far as to term it "the most misunderstood youth cultural phenomenon of the 1990s".¹³ Sociologists and anthropologists have

⁹ S. White, "Killer pills: Lethal batch of super strength ecstasy blamed for deaths of FIVE young people", *Mirror Online*, 22/01/2013, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/drug-deaths-five-die-after-1549883>, accessed 22/01/2013.

¹⁰ Ecstasy generally refers to MDMA, though has been applied to similar chemicals like MDA and MDE too. In this case, The *Mirror* has deliberately misused the term to emphasise the threat of danger.

¹¹ M. Power, "Killer pills: myth or murder?", *Mixmag*, 04/04/2013, <http://www.mixmag.net/words/features/killer-pills-myth-or-murder>, accessed 04/04/2013.

¹² D. Campbell, "Home Office drugs report backs raves", *The Guardian*, 08/01/1994, p. 5.

¹³ S. Redhead, *Subculture to Clubcultures: An introduction to Popular Cultural Studies* (Oxford, 1997), p. 102.

helped give a voice to those that have participated in the scene, shedding light on changing leisure patterns and the response of British youth to shifting socio-economic conditions and political paradigms. Unfortunately, the newspapers have so often written young people out of the story. Their tendency has been to simplify the narrative so that rave participants are presented as the passive victims of external forces like ‘ruthless promoters’ or ‘evil pushers’. Thus, a bottom-up approach has done much to counter this view and has demonstrated that soft drug use has become an unproblematic and normal part of life for many British young people.

The aim of this piece is to place rave culture within an historic tradition of collective joy and to demonstrate its significance as a liberating and positive force within society, while re-appropriating the problems traditionally associated with it as a consequence of weaknesses within the British political system itself.

“Youth cultures are necessarily infused with the prevailing ideologies of their times, whether espousing or reacting against them, or both simultaneously”¹⁴

In the years preceding the explosion of rave culture, the British people had lived under two terms of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative rule, characterised by its return to nineteenth-century economic liberalism and moral absolutism. This piece will suggest that the prevailing ideology of Thatcherism has had a powerful legacy; indeed, the ‘Big Bang’ of 1986 has been linked to the financial crises of recent years.¹⁵ Writers from all disciplines have tied the birth of rave culture in Britain specifically to Thatcherism, both as a cause in its development but also as an influence upon its character. The sustained deterioration of Britain’s inner cities exposed increasing numbers to the problems of unemployment, crime and poverty, confirming the Prime Minister’s ‘return to Victorian values’. In the years following her ascendancy, the influence of neo-liberalism emphasised selfishness as virtue, while swift deindustrialization facilitated urban decay and the fragmentation of working class identity. Without making any general claims about the experience of ‘ordinary people’, the return of mass unemployment had serious implications for the working population: “as work disappears, consumption rather than production becomes the arena in which identity is assembled.”¹⁶

Mass Unemployment

Before the appreciation of sterling and the world recession in 1979, unemployment in the UK was 5.9 per cent. By 1982, it has risen to 12.9 per cent. Over the same period, unemployment in the 15 major OECD [members of the organisation for economic co-operation and development] countries rose from 5.1 per cent to 8.3 per cent... why should the rise in Britain have been so much greater than in any other comparable economy?¹⁷

¹⁴ M. Collin, *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House* (London, 1997), p. 7.

¹⁵ *A Price Worth Paying?* (radio show), Analysis, BBC Radio 4, 01/02/2010.

¹⁶ *Drugs and Young People*, p. 23.

¹⁷ *House of Commons Select Committee Report* quoted in D. Taylor, “Living with unemployment” in A. Walker, C. Walker (eds.), *The Growing Divide* (Child Poverty Action Group: London, 1987), pp. 70-71.

This report from a Treasury and Civil Service committee on international monetary arrangements identifies two key influences upon unemployment levels: the value of the pound and the global economic crises. However, as alluded to by the authors, the world recession wasn't *that* bad; the overvaluation of the pound was making things worse. Indeed, this same report confirms that "this is by far the most excessive overvaluation which any major currency has experienced in recent monetary history", citing it as "the most important single element" in directing Britain's economy in the 1980s.¹⁸ This information suggests that Thatcher's government knowingly pursued a damaging economic policy – one that allowed the well-off to build upon and consolidate their wealth while British exports became less competitive, inflation soared, interest rates were increased and unemployment more than doubled. In 1987, just one year before acid house would make national headlines, the Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lawson boasted about the government's success:

We are now entering our seventh successive year of steady growth...the public finances are sound and strong and unemployment is falling. These are the fruits of the Government's determination, in bad times as well as good, to hold firmly to our policies of sound money and free markets.¹⁹

The last sentence is essentially an acknowledgement of negligence coupled with an expression of stubbornness. As things stood, despite seven years of 'growth' (whatever that means), by 1987, Britain was in its sixth year of unemployment above three million (over 15 per cent of the workforce). This was considerably higher even than the 1970s' peak of around 1,600,000.²⁰ Interestingly, the Conservatives built their opposition to Labour in 1979 around the issue of high unemployment. No matter, the 'iron lady' pushed onwards; a "radical economic experiment" was underway.²¹ This entailed the rapid dismantling of Britain's already-declining native industries and the deregulation of the stock market; above all it gave the clear message that it paid to be selfish. Welfare spending was cut, while money was ploughed into law and order. It is perhaps no surprise, given the impact of Thatcher's policies, that her tenure in office has been interpreted as an attack on the working classes. By the end of the 1980s, workers' rights had been significantly diminished: the right to appeal unfair dismissal was weakened, minimum wage rates for 16-21 year olds were removed, and the ability of unions to call strikes was subject to new rules.²² While the number of those out of work continued to grow, the experience of those in work became increasingly difficult. If we are to assess the government by its own aims, by the mid-1980s it was failing. It is worth remembering that Thatcher wanted to create a nation of enterprising individuals free from state dependence; between 1979 and 1984, the number of people on supplementary benefit - and therefore *dependent* on the state - actually increased by 77 per cent.²³

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Nigel Lawson, "Budget Statement", HC Debate, 17/03/1987, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1987/mar/17/budget-statement>.

²⁰ Taylor, "Living with unemployment" in *The Growing Divide*, p. 70.

²¹ *Andrew Marr's History of Modern Britain 4: Revolution!* (TV documentary), Andrew Marr (BBC, 2006).

²² C. Wrigley, *British Trade Unions Since 1933* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 73-77.

²³ D. Piachaud, "The growth of poverty" in *The Growing Divide*, p. 22.

The burden of unemployment disproportionately hit the old manufacturing towns, while the growth of new service-sector industries proliferated mostly in the south. The unemployment figures for 1987 are telling: 16.9 per cent for the north compared with just 8.5 per cent for the south-east; the national average was 11.9 per cent.²⁴ While these developments built upon existing tensions between north and south, the increasing disparities *within* regions emphasised the differences between inner city and suburb. The traditional manufacturing centres in Lancashire, Yorkshire, the North-east and Scotland experienced a surge in unemployment that was worsened by cuts in public expenditure. According to one scholar, the Thatcher administration was responsible for “record inequalities in earnings”.²⁵ While the lowest-paid groups experienced real-term pay cuts for the first time since the 1930s, the richest 10 per cent of earners received almost half of the government’s tax cuts and real-term wage increases of over 20 per cent.²⁶ Britain’s urban decline was exacerbated; those that could afford to escape to more prosperous areas did so, while those left behind were forced to cope with increasing levels of crime and insufficient public services. In 1985, the church released a damning report on Britain’s urban plight, claiming that:

It is arguable that rich and poor, suburban and inner city, privileged and deprived, have been becoming more sharply separated from each other for many years, and that the impoverished minority has become increasingly cut off from the mainstream of our national life. In addition, there is undoubtedly a geographical dimension to the problem - conditions are worse overall in the north and the midlands than in the south, worse in the nineteenth century industrial cities than in York, Norwich or Bristol.²⁷

This confirms the conclusion of many scholars that Britain became ever more divided in the 1980s. While there was a clear class element to the problem, the disproportionate concentration of ethnic minorities in the inner cities further complicated the issue. Since the immigration of thousands of African and Asian people as “units of labour” from the 1950s, they remained at a disadvantage.²⁸ Their position was made increasingly difficult by inadequate infrastructure and racist political rhetoric. Not only were ethnic minorities more likely to be unemployed than white people, they were also more likely to stay unemployed for longer periods of time.²⁹ Between 1980 and 1981, the number of unemployed ethnic minorities rose by 82%, paralleled by a rise in criminal activity and a heavy-handed police response.³⁰ In April 1981, the extent of this institutional racism and structural inequality was briefly revealed to the rest of the nation when riots broke out in Brixton due to discriminatory use of stop and search powers by the police. By July, over twenty urban centres had erupted into chaos, confirming that this was no isolated problem. If the riots themselves were insufficient at showcasing the deep-seated tensions within British society, the response of the media and the establishment certainly was

²⁴ S. Winyard, “Divided Britain”, in *The Growing Divide*, p. 41.

²⁵ D. Byrne, “Rich and poor: the growing divide” in *The Growing Divide*, p. 29.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-31.

²⁷ Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the city: A Call for Action by Church and Nation* (The Church of England: London, 1985), p. xv.

²⁸ H. Arnott, “Second-class citizens” in *The Growing Divide*, p. 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³⁰ Petridis, A., ‘Ska for the madding crowd’, *The Guardian*, 08/03/2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2002/mar/08/artsfeatures.popandrock>, accessed 28/03/2012.

revealing. The government placed the blame on the rioters themselves and emphasised the need for tougher policing in urban areas. The press followed suit with misleading and unhelpful sensationalism, overwhelmingly framing the riotous inner city as a “phenomenon without causes, without development and without a history”.³¹ Despite a lack of debate in the press, the eerie, cross-cultural themes of the Specials’ *Ghost Town* expressed the collective unease felt in Britain’s inner cities, ringing out across the country for three weeks at number one in the singles chart. This, a deeply divided Britain – led by a government that weakened its trade unions, limited the opportunities of ethnic minorities and demonised its social security claimants - whilst at the same time promoted self-help and hard work - was the environment in which “the most vibrant and diverse youth movement Britain had ever seen” was to emerge.³²

**“This town, is coming like a ghost town
Why must the youth fight against themselves?
Government leaving the youth on the shelf
This place, is coming like a ghost town
No job to be found in this country
Can't go on no more
The people getting angry”³³**

Unprecedented numbers of disaffected young people were facing bleak prospects. The relatively constant flow of ideological attacks upon benefit claimants and immigrants resulted in a sort of desensitization to political ideologies among Britain’s youth. There were increasing numbers of young people who – regardless of their own ethnicity or background social background - felt a sense of collective alienation from the society’s prevailing cultural norms, which led to their increased desire for ‘time out’³⁴. Mass unemployment had simultaneously created a culture of dependence upon the state through welfare on the one hand, and a culture of alienation from the state, which was expressed increasingly through crime and subcultural activity, on the other. The Jahoda thesis suggests that participation in “regular activity” and a sense of “collective purpose” are vital to forming and maintaining a sense of identity, both of which are applicable to the rise of gang culture and football violence in the 1980s.³⁵ However, with the growing influence of market liberalism and the explosion of consumerism within Britain, young people, “in the absence of regular, decent employment”, have tended to “construct their identities through consumption... thus goods such as alcoholic drinks, drugs, clothes and music are all used to explore individual identities.”³⁶ The rave provided young people with a place outside recognised society where they could socialise with other like-minded people and express themselves freely.

³¹ J. Rodrigues, “The Riots of ‘81”, *Marxism Today* (1981), pp. 19.

³² Collin, *Altered State*, p. 4.

³³ The Specials, ‘Ghost Town’ (music recording), *Ghost Town* (2 Tone, 1981).

³⁴ “Time spent outside the normal constraints which restrict behaviour” (McAndrew and Edgerton, 1971).

³⁵ J. Gershuny, “The Psychological Consequences of Unemployment: An Assessment of the Jahoda Thesis” in D. Gallie, C. Marsh and C. Vogler (eds.), *Social Change and the Experience of Unemployment* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 213-214.

³⁶ *Drugs and Young People*, p. 23.

Thus, the decaying post-industrial urban landscape provided the environment in which the rave culture would thrive. However, in a sense, raving is a deeply traditional activity, revealing itself to us in its most modern form. As Ehrenreich has demonstrated, humans have a long history of collective joy; whether it manifested itself in ancient religious ritual or in tribal dance, the rave is not new. It has, however, always been regarded as a threat to social order:

At the height of the festivity, we step out of our assigned roles and statuses of gender, ethnicity, tribe, and rank – and into a brief utopia defined by egalitarianism, creativity and mutual love. This is how danced rituals and festivities served to bind prehistoric human groups, and this is what still beckons us today...hierarchy is antagonistic to the festive and ecstatic tradition. This leaves hierarchical societies with no means of holding people together except for mass spectacles – and force.³⁷

Such mass spectacles have traditionally helped to stir a sense of superficial unity among the British population, veiling social tensions and ignoring changing leisure pursuits. On the 29th July 1981, after four months of fear and uncertainty over the future of Britain's major cities, the royal wedding of Charles and Diana arrived on cue to prevent any meaningful discussion about the riots from taking place. A staggering 28.4 million tuned in to watch the wedding; families up and down the country became absorbed in the spectacle, throwing street parties and enjoying the day off work. Between April and June of 1982, barely a day went by without mention of the Falklands Isles in the popular press. This issue really permeated into popular consciousness in May, as British families were intimately drawn into a televised conflict that was 8,000 miles away. The British victory in the Falklands is often cited as a key factor in the re-election of Margaret Thatcher in 1983; her satisfaction ratings rose to 59 per cent in June, up from 25 per cent before the conflict.³⁸ In 1984, more than 24 million watched Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean win gold medals in ice skating at the Olympic Games in Yugoslavia. With the riots in the past, and with little-to-no coverage amongst all the spectacle, the problem of unemployment seemed almost invisible.

As the military or sporting victories have faded into the distance and the harsh realities of urban life have shifted back into focus, people are left wanting. The decline of the traditional labour industries, particularly in the north of England and in Scotland, can be tied to a shift in the leisure patterns of many young people, as they have found themselves with more free time. In 1986, the *British Medical Journal* published an article that found that unemployment was “significantly and positively correlated” with increased use of alcohol and illegal drugs.³⁹ The most notable change was the steady and continuing increase in the number of cannabis users, which was paralleled by a change in traditional drinking patterns. In 1993, a study published in the *Financial Times* found that pub visits by young people had declined by 11 per cent between 1987 and 1991, suggesting that more people were drinking at home or, attending raves and taking drugs. In this way, rave culture can viewed as a challenge to the dominance of the alcohol industry; the study concluded

³⁷ B. Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (London, 2007), p. 253.

³⁸ M. Rutherford, “Politics Today: 1982: Margaret Thatcher's year”, *Financial Times*, 31/12/1982, p. 10.

³⁹ D. F. Peck, and M.A. Plant, “Unemployment and illegal drug use: concordant evidence from a perspective study and national trends”, *British Medical Journal* 293 (1986), pp. 930-931.

that raves were “a significant threat to spending for such sectors as licenced drinks retailers and drinks companies” and placed the value of licensed raves alone at £2 billion.⁴⁰ A study in 1994 suggested that rave culture “fits neatly into the rhythm of life for unemployed or peripherally unemployed young people with large tracts of time to fill”, which the continued expansion of club culture – and persistence of unemployment – would seem to support.⁴¹

Unfortunately, government attempts to alleviate unemployment resulted in further alienation. With the introduction of Employment Training schemes in 1988, unemployed benefit claimants were offered the choice to continue being a jobseeker, or to receive training for a similar wage (which often worked out as a pay cut). One young person worked 20 hours a week for £53, which is just £2.65 an hour. He was quoted saying “I’d go out robbing before I did this. They’ll just need more police now”. Another claimed that the scheme was unhelpful: “I cannot work for £10 a week. I will start stealing again, and I will end up back in prison. In my own mind, I know I will not survive.”⁴² Perhaps this was not the best strategy to encourage the disenfranchised youth to contribute to the system. Thus, an “offensive against working-class communities, industries, values and institutions” came alongside the normalisation of mass unemployment and increasing drug use; no wonder there has been an identity crisis for working people.⁴³ Government schemes like the Employment Training programme did little to encourage people who already felt excluded from society; just one month after its introduction there were reports of high drop-out rates and complaints about the level of training.⁴⁴

Between 1982 and 1986, while much of the country was engrossed in mass spectacle, a nascent dance culture was being imported from urban America. In Manchester, the impact of deindustrialization was visible: “the old big manufacturing industries with their jobs for life and their community-creating certainties had gone”.⁴⁵ Traditionally a symbol of the city’s global importance, its many factories now lay dormant – though they would later provide the newly inspired youth with ample practice space for years to come. The sheer multiplicity of people that had been attracted to the city since its ascendance in the nineteenth century had contributed to its character. It had always been accommodating of new musical cultures – through jazz, rock ‘n’ roll and soul, to punk, hip-hop and electro – Manchester was able to soak up the DIY ideology of punk and combine it with the style and cool of black dance music. This helped to lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and grass-roots dance movement to emerge, bringing the disused warehouses and derelict factories throbbing into life once more.

In a time when Manchester was “living off the past, run down, beset by bad drugs”, a new direction was in order.⁴⁶ The influence of New York electro was already apparent in the music of New Order, whose *Blue Monday* went on to become Britain’s best-selling 12 inch record of all time. Three years before the explosion of national ‘acid

⁴⁰ D. Summers, “£2bn raves pose threat to leisure spending”, *Financial Times*, 26/10/1993, p. 20.

⁴¹ *Drugs and Young People*, p. 35.

⁴² J. Gapper, “Mixed Feelings As Jobless Face New Training Scheme – Run up to the launch of ET”, *Financial Times*, 31/08/1988, p. 8.

⁴³ O. Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* [updated version] (London, 2007), p. 40.

⁴⁴ J. Gapper, “Employment Training In Difficulties In First Month”, *Financial Times*, 10/10/1988, p. 1.

⁴⁵ D. Haslam, *Manchester, England: The story of the pop cult city* (London, 1999), p. 162.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

house' parties in 1988, Manchester DJs like Little Martin and Mike Pickering were already playing the first house imports from Chicago. By 1988, the sound of Detroit techno – characterised by the use of new democratising technology like drum machines and samplers – was also beginning to make waves in the north. It was the fusion of these two styles that created the acid house sound that Manchester would become so well known for. It is a testament to the unspoken power of music that two American cities blighted by deindustrialization and social dislocation might find a home for their music in the old industrial centres of Manchester and Sheffield.

In the years that followed, Manchester was to be the nucleus from which the northern illegal rave scene would grow. Already a well-established centre for alternative culture, bands like Buzzcocks and the Smiths had played their part in attracting huge numbers of students to the local universities. The mix of the crowd at the Hacienda – 'the cathedral to house music in Britain' – set it apart from the more elitist clubs in London. Collin claims that acid house had united the city: "the outcasts from the north side of town, the scammers and grafters and chancers and characters mixing with the pop stars and students and fashion-conscious club kids".⁴⁷ Young people who had little else to do apart from sign on and smoke weed were finding themselves back at the Hacienda each week sweating it out in front of the speakers with complete strangers. What set these people apart from the rest of society – that they were under-employed or unemployed – bound them together in the rave.

As the Employment Training scheme was rolled out in September 1988 with its insulting low-pay and poor training, it reinforced the sense of alienation that many young people were feeling. Raving, on the other hand, helped people feel like they were worth something; it allowed them "to do *something*, whether it be making a record or selling a bag of pills".⁴⁸ Paul Oakenfold claims that "Ecstasy makes you think: 'I could do this, I'm going to do it. And you do it'"⁴⁹. It was this attitude that characterised the Manchester scene. In 1988, Detroit techno innovator Derrick May had described life in the motor city: "Factories are closing, people are drifting away, and kids are killing each other for fun. The whole order has broken down."⁵⁰ Young producers like Graham Massey and Martin Price (808 state) and Gerald Simpson (A Guy Called Gerald) drew obvious parallels with May's experience, especially considering the heightened gang violence in Manchester following the social dislocation of the 1980s. They followed May down fresh technological avenues of self-expression and produced some of the most era-defining music with *Pacific State* and *Voodoo Ray*. The former peaked at 10 in the singles charts, while the latter got into the top 20 without any airplay; underground dance music was challenging cultural norms. Manchester's youth was building itself a way out of recession. Massey commented that:

"The empowerment of people was an important part of it... it was the first sense of community there'd been in years. We could define the culture, we could push the boundaries of the culture. We were very much feeding off what was going on around us because there was so much energy around... there was an atmosphere of 'you can do it, you can do what you want'... I just feel incredibly lucky to have

⁴⁷ *Altered State*, pp. 145-146.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵⁰ *Manchester, England*, p. 164.

been there at that point because music happens on a very personal level, but this happened on a collective consciousness level.”⁵¹

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has described this fleeting phenomenon as the “the intoxicating reality, which once again does not respect the individual, but even seeks to abolish the individual and to redeem him through a mystical feeling of collective unity”.⁵² This was hardly sympathetic to Thatcher’s moralistic individualism. The intoxicating cocktail of innovative cross-cultural dance music and an empathogenic-amphetamine substance in a hypnotic, sensory-teasing environment was providing an experience of mythical proportions...

“You are in a pure space of non-thinking... this is the Nirvana that all the Masters and Saints talk about.”⁵³

By 1989, both the local and national press was documenting the Manchester scene, which constituted a major challenge to London’s hegemony over pop culture and the stale, mass-produced consumer pop that came with it. The *Manchester Evening News* boasted about 808 State’s “incredible tally of Radio One plays” and their ability to “produce some of the most experimental dance sounds around”,⁵⁴ while *The Observer* ran a feature on Manchester’s “working-class musical revolution”. The article proclaimed the city as England’s ‘dance capital’, chronicling the “breakdown of barriers between rock band and dance floor” and the “thriving warehouse scene”; it even mentioned the positive influence of ecstasy.⁵⁵

A nightlife culture was developing and - not only was it providing thousands of young people with pleasure - it brought with it new opportunities. The demand for this new leisure activity was met by the opening of new venues, record shops and clothes shops which itself was paralleled by the opening of new hotels and extensions in public transport. There was money to be made; it was estimated that the clothing company Joe Bloggs was worth an estimated £60 million alone.⁵⁶ Some claim that the rave scene catalysed the regeneration of Manchester that has often been attributed to the IRA bomb of 1996:

The boom in the night-time economy since the rave revolution of 1988 has been responsible for rejuvenating previously bleak areas of Manchester; the Hacienda brought life to a dead end of Whitworth Street, Sankey’s Soap from 1994 onwards was the first sign of new life in Ancoats, and Barca and Duke’s 92 in Castlefield, the Boardwalk and Atlas in Knott Mill, and Dry in the Northern Quarter all moved into rundown areas and kick-started the long process back to prosperity. Manchester’s pop music and club culture was a tourist attraction, as well as a source of re-employment, cultural expression, economic regeneration and international profile.⁵⁷

⁵¹ *Altered State*, p. 151.

⁵² *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 14.

⁵³ Pushers ‘calling card’ quoted in “Calling card of a deadly salesman”, *South Wales Echo*, 18/01/1986.

⁵⁴ “808 State press article 1989”, *Manchester District Music Archive*, accessed at <http://www.mdarchive.co.uk/archive/showartefact.php?fid=2> on 10/12/2013.

⁵⁵ L. Brown, “House-proud”, *The Observer*, 17/12/1989, p. 9.

⁵⁶ S. Spence, *The Stone Roses: War and Peace* (London, 2012), p. 160.

⁵⁷ *Manchester, England*, p. 140.

The accessibility of dance music gave young and disenfranchised people a way to express themselves. Moss Side, one of Manchester's most deprived areas, also felt some of the rejuvenation. When unemployment spiked in the 1980s, up to the 60 per cent of the local black population were out of work and the area developed a reputation for drugs and violence. Some of Manchester's most successful artists, such as the Ruthless Rap Assassins, MC Tunes and A Guy Called Gerald, all came out of Moss Side and demonstrated that there was an alternative to crime for the local youth. By 1990, the *Manchester Evening News* could proudly state that "even before it was formally opened, the latest Moss Side project had 190 applications, and its training scheme fully booked for the next three years". The building of the Forward Beat recording studio aimed to provide 45 people each year with training to enter the music industry.⁵⁸ For a period it really felt like things were changing. Promoter Tommy Smith passionately recalls the atmosphere of the illegal raves in 1989:

You had euphoria spilling out all over the place, genuine happiness... there's something inside when you dance, you're into another dimension, you've got a whole new view. And if you're doing this en masse you can just thrust forward with the power and energy. The law of the dance was stronger than the law of the land. What Ecstasy and hallucinogens did was give people access to other levels of the brain that normally would be shut down... Not only had they got a new life but they'd got a new mind. It would be a shame to say 'we were all on drugs, it was mad and we had a good time, it was a fashion' because it wasn't.⁵⁹

The rediscovered pleasures of collective joy were bringing new meaning to people's lives; "people were shedding their black clothes and opening out like brightly coloured flowers".⁶⁰ Anthony Donnelly remembers his transition from 'spiv' to ecstasy evangelist:

We're supposedly sons of the Quality Street Gang...we had a base in Wythenshawe where every activity in the world was going on. One hundred young lads in there on beer, but all of a sudden five or ten of them have gone wayward, they're coming in with fucking bandannas tied round their heads. From 1988 to the end of 1990 we didn't touch a drop of alcohol... for two years we went on a mission from God, we were like Jehovah's Witnesses going out promoting it. Telling our parents it's going to change the world and all that.⁶¹

Something about this communal ecstatic experience was striking a chord with people. It felt *right*. One might be reminded of Apollo in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, as he awakens to his Dionysian impulses within and catches "a real glimpse into the essence of things".⁶² Indeed, as people shook off their fearful, unemployed non-identity, they felt empowered. This was an experience that was to be repeated over and over by ravers for years to come, realising that their "Apollonian consciousness was, like a veil, merely covering the Dionysian world in front of"

⁵⁸ "Ruthless Rap Assassins press article, Moss Side Community Centre – 1990", *Manchester District Music Archive*, <http://www.mdmarchive.co.uk/archive/showartefact.php?aid=8380&fid=2>, accessed 11/02/2013.

⁵⁹ *Altered State*, p. 152.

⁶⁰ S. Garratt, "E Generation: Summer of love", *The Independent*, 15/08/1998, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/e-generation-summer-of-love-1171762.html>, accessed 13/02/2013.

⁶¹ P. Walsh, *Gang War: The Inside Story of the Manchester Gangs* (London, 2003) p. 72.

⁶² *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 29.

them.⁶³ Victor Turner also sounds like he refers to the rave when describing the phenomenon of ‘communitas’, a “moment in and out of time and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition of a generalised social bond that has ceased to be”.⁶⁴

Understood within this framework, the rave provides us with a glimpse into our true nature, one untainted by artificially constructed divides and concerns. The growth of rave culture within Britain oversaw a general positive shift in attitudes and promoted a culture of creativity; it was a youth-led movement that excavated our lost tribal senses of communion, the “primordial oneness”.⁶⁵ After the initial transcendent experience, people wanted it to keep going. Nietzsche writes that “as soon as that daily reality comes back again into consciousness, one feels disgusting”.⁶⁶

Furthermore, Collin found that “because some people thought that this was all that mattered, that they had discovered the meaning of life, going back to dull nine-to-fives seemed pointless.”⁶⁷ This sentiment is echoed by a ‘new age traveller’ who was interviewed in the *Guardian* in 1994; “I’ve had a few jobs and every time, I get to thinking, where is my life? There must be more to life than this.”⁶⁸ As Nietzsche suggests, people start to change: “art alone can turn those thoughts of disgust at the horror or absurdity of existence into imaginary constructs which permit living to continue”⁶⁹. In this way, rave acts as a revitalising factor in the lives of the disillusioned: “in the re-entry period after the comedown, many became cultural entrepreneurs, setting up clubs, record companies, shops and small businesses to service the scene”.⁷⁰

“Thatcher turned straight people into criminals.... She laid the cards out and people had no choice but to play the game”⁷¹

One such way that people serviced the scene was by selling drugs. With bleak prospects, many young people were willing to rake the risks involved. Law enforcement was slow to react; Greater Manchester Police made no ecstasy-related arrests in 1988.⁷² An American study has associated low-paid employment with drug dealing, describing it as “an underground version of ‘moonlighting’” as it “provides a high-paying supplement to regular employment”.⁷³ In addition to participation in the growing informal economy, where money could also be made by charging admission to illegal parties, the rave culture helped to establish new sectors of the creative industries. The use of new technologies democratised music making; in the late 1980s much of the now famous analogue Roland equipment was accessible and relatively cheap. Such developments have constituted a challenge to the hegemony of

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶⁴ V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York, 1969), p. 96.

⁶⁵ *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 18.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶⁷ *Altered State*, pp. 80-81.

⁶⁸ J. Goodwin, “A dark new age”, *The Guardian*, 07/05/1994, p. 39.

⁶⁹ *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 18.

⁷⁰ *Altered State*, pp. 82-83.

⁷¹ S. Ryder in *Altered State*, p. 168.

⁷² *Gang War*, p. 70.

⁷³ P. Reuter, R. MacCoun, P. Murphy, *Money from Crime: A Study of the Economics of Drug Dealing in Washington DC* (Washington, 1990), p. ix.

corporations and the 'big labels' in British music.⁷⁴ Amongst all the negative press about the danger of raving to the nation's youth, *The Times* published an article in 1990 about "the appearance of an unknown artist, Adamski, at the top of the charts". His single *Killer* was an international hit and peaked at number one in the singles chart in May 1990. The article claimed his rise to the top "was largely due to playing the acid house parties or raves last summer" and that his large following was "unprecedented for an artist without a recording contract". Rave was challenging cultural norms and providing new routes to success; "it only goes to show that playing for thousands of people in the middle of nowhere is a good way of getting yourself known". Adamski later signed to MCA, a major American record label, and his first album sold over 60,000 copies.⁷⁵

Thus, it is arguable that rave empowered people of working age who were struggling to find work in a changing world. It also changed their time out of work; the focus of nights out shifted from drunken courting and fighting to freaky dancing and a shared appreciation for the moment. A big thing for the right-wing press in the 1990s was its focus upon young girls and the threat that the rave posed to them. Whether it was headlines like "Ecstasy 'is big threat women'" (*The Sun*, 30/11/2001) or "WOMEN ARE 'MORE AT RISK FROM ECSTASY'" (*The Daily Mirror*, 30/11/2001), females were repeatedly treated as though they were more vulnerable than men and as though drugs would be somehow corrupting to their character. The tragic death of Leah Betts in 1995 and the subsequent moral panic was perhaps enough to put anybody off taking ecstasy. An image of the comatose 18 year old was widely circulated; it carried the clear message that just one ecstasy pill was enough to kill. It has been suggested that her death was highly publicised because of her middle class background, that this was more shocking and therefore more newsworthy.⁷⁶ It is perhaps worth considering whether there would have been such hysteria over her death if she was from a deprived council estate. It has since been confirmed hyponatraemia from excessive water consumption played a role in Leah's death, highlighting the shortcomings in drug education.⁷⁷ Considering the substantial increase in illegal drug use from the late 1980s, such cases might have been avoided had the government opted for a policy of harm reduction rather than stubborn prohibition. Indeed, pop star Sting actually called for ecstasy to be legalised after Leah's death, claiming that "we can make sure what we are taking is safe and that it is ecstasy"; a sensible approach, considering that millions of pills were and still are consumed each week regardless of the law.⁷⁸

As a result of such hysteria, women have been written out of the literature on drugs, too often viewed as passive victims of their effects, which are assumed to corrupt their character and make them sexually deviant. A study of female ecstasy users in Sheffield has demonstrated the positive impact of ecstasy and rave culture. Instead of revealing the chaotic and dangerous nature of the dance culture, this probing study actually gave a voice to young females, who "used ecstasy for pleasure, believed

⁷⁴ D. Hesmondhalgh, "The British Dance Music Industry: A Case Study of Independent Cultural Production", *The British Journal of Sociology* 49:2 (1998), p. 237.

⁷⁵ M. Nicholls, "Floppy disk jockey", *The Times*, 12/05/1990, p. 42.

⁷⁶ K. Murji, "The Agony and the Ecstasy: Drugs, the Media and Mortality", <http://www.psychodelic-library.org/murji.htm>, accessed 14/03/2013.

⁷⁷ S. O'Connell, "A fatal thirst", *The Times*, 28/08/2001.

⁷⁸ S. Boggan, "Sting in call to legalise ecstasy", *The Independent*, 19/01/1996.

themselves to be independent in their use, and did not view their actions as deviant – all of which contradict traditional research findings.” The women also found the rave had an impact on males – they “contrasted dance events to alcohol-based clubs where they often felt they were targets for men intent on pursuing sexual relations”. The most significant findings of this study were that all of the respondents reported positive attitude changes since frequenting raves and consuming ecstasy. ‘Vicki’ believed that “it makes you know there’s an alternative way of looking at things... there’s more to life than stupid fucking worries that you’ve got”, while ‘Ann’ claimed that “it’s enlightened me, cos I’ve seen that things are never that bad, you can sort them out”.⁷⁹ When placed within the context of the social dislocation of the eighties – and the disproportionate impact of structural changes upon women – the power of rave culture to lift people up and remain positive is really quite significant.⁸⁰

Organised Crime

The inability of the government to re-employ much of the population following deindustrialization had seen an increase in crime and dependent drug use, particularly in deprived areas like Moss Side. Alongside the government’s refusal to tackle the formation of an illegal underground drug and party culture, the easy money attracted the attention of well-established criminals. Young people growing up in places like Moss Side saw the local gangsters as role models, who, like themselves, “had grown up together, could not find jobs, and turned to crime”.⁸¹ Between 1988 and 1995, the value of Britain’s drug economy grew by an estimated 500 per cent. Had the government taken the advice of its own Home Office report which concluded that the elimination of drug use was “an unobtainable goal”, perhaps the creation of a new, controlled drug economy could have prevented all the hardship. Instead, the government continued its policy of condemnation and negligence. The same Thatcher ideology that promoted self-help and enterprise encouraged young criminals to exploit the new illegal underworld for all it was worth. Salford gangster Paul Doyle recalls his first few encounters with the security at raves: “the guns would come out and we wanted the whole night’s takings. They might have been big doormen but they soon realised that people don’t fight with their fists down our neck of the woods no more. We got a big reputation for that”.⁸² The positive energy circulating in Manchester was already fading away as the consequences of a mass illegal drug culture became apparent. As early as June 1989, a masked gunman shot three bouncers at Manchester’s Thunderdome and the club was taken over by the Cheetham Hill gang; they put their own men on the door and took control of the drugs. This interaction between criminal underworld and illegal rave culture would be repeated all over the country, as the ideology of the free market extended out into club-land and demonstrated the dangers of mass unemployment. In a House of Commons debate in 1990, despite the emphasis on the “serious criminal dimension to illegal acid house parties”, anachronistic MPs focused upon the “moral dangers” to young people, rather than the existence of a huge black market. Government legislation in 1990 increased the penalties for unlicensed

⁷⁹ S. Hinchcliff, “The meaning of ecstasy use and clubbing to women in the late 1990s”, *International Journal of Drug Policy* 12 (2001), p. 455.

⁸⁰ C. Glendinning, “Impoverishing women” in *The Growing Divide*, p. 50.

⁸¹ *Gang Wars*, p. 99.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

parties, while the Criminal Justice Bill of 1994 dealt specifically with collective trespass and unlicensed gatherings to “sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats”. Such legislation caused a fragmentation of the rave scene; new penalties were introduced for club owners when illegal drugs were found on the premises, while drug prohibition led to increased drug contamination resulting in confusion and casualties.

The response of the right-wing press to rave culture has traditionally been characterised by condescension and sensationalism. In October of 1988, *The Sun* was among the first of the national papers to take note of the growing scene. Initially attempting to cash in on the popularity of a new youth movement, smiley t-shirts were advertised for “only £5.50 man” alongside a guide to dance floor “lingo”.⁸³ Just one week later, the t-shirt campaign was dropped and *The Sun*’s doctor Vernon Coleman penned an article outlining the perilous effects of Ecstasy. It typifies the kind of reporting that other newspapers like the *Daily Mirror* and the *Express* would later use, overwhelmingly portraying drug users as passive ‘victims’ and drug dealers as evil ‘pushers’. In 1988, due to its novel status as a ‘wonder drug’, there was probably more free ecstasy given away than in any other year. Much in the same way the initial supplies of cannabis and LSD were passed through the hands of the proponents of the 1960s counterculture, in the early rave days the supply of ecstasy was largely travelling via established networks of ecstatic hedonists who passed it on to friends. Even in the mid-1990s, when there was clearly an organised criminal element to drug supply, did only a minority of young people obtain their ecstasy from complete strangers.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the writing style implies that some kind of agreed moral code has been violated, and authoritatively informs the reader of a new drug that nobody really knew very much about. Some of the “medically proven” effects included frightening hallucinations – “if you don’t like spiders you’ll start seeing giant ones”, the risk of sexual attack – “if you’re young enough there’s a good chance you’ll be sexually assaulted under the influence” and the danger of going insane – “there’s a good chance you’ll end up in a mental hospital for life”.⁸⁵ While it is concerning that *The Sun* presented these as “medically proven” effects rather than deeply misled assumptions, what is perhaps most worrying is the paper sold around 4 million copies each day at the time, disseminating this dangerous nonsense to much of the public. Interestingly, Coleman has been a proponent of drug legalization since 1986 and even published a book entitled *The Drugs Myth* in 1992. The very same doctor that pushed this hyped sensationalist agenda outlined above went on to write:

“Repression has failed. Decriminalization would enable us to help drug users without the short and violent arm of the law interfering. Our present system, based on force and hypocrisy, does not work, has never worked and never will work.”⁸⁶

This kind of information highlights the inconsistencies within the British press and completely undermines its legitimacy as protector of the public interest; in his role as tabloid sensationalist, Coleman distributes misleading and unhelpful information

⁸³ G. Bushell, Sky, R., “It’s groovy and cool-it’s our Acid House T-shirt!”, *The Sun*, 12/10/1988, p. 15.

⁸⁴ R. Hammersley, F. Khan, J. Ditton, *Ecstasy and the Rise of the Chemical Generation* (London, 2002), p. 19.

⁸⁵ V. Coleman, “Don’t be a sucker”, *The Sun*, 19/10/1988.

⁸⁶ V. Coleman, “The Drugs Myth: Why the drugs war must stop”, 1992, <http://www.vernoncoleman.com/downloads/drugsmyth.htm>, accessed 05/04/2013.

about ecstasy, but in his role as progressive social commentator, he provides us with a reasoned debate about the hypocrisy of our drug laws.

The continued obstinacy exhibited by the British government with regard to drug culture in recent years is entirely in keeping with the aforementioned theories referred to by writers such as Nietzsche and Turner. Rave culture promotes values that are antithetical to the prevailing political ideologies of the last thirty years and the government's response has only served to complicate rave culture's progression. Free market liberalism has encouraged people to make money, regardless of the implications; to "to follow one's psychobiological urges at the expense of one's fellows."⁸⁷ This ideology has been powerful in shaping the world we live in today – a world plagued by excessive bankers' bonuses and the pathological hoarding of cash by dishonest elites. This ideology is challenged in the rave, as the desire to love and be a part of a community is brought out by music – a transcendent form of expression. The power of music and dance to bring people together has traditionally been suppressed by elites because of its ability to unite people, while less satisfying routes to happiness like religion or materialism have been permitted and continue to divide the masses.

Turner claims that traditional instances of 'communitas' are viewed as "dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting to persons, objects, events, and relationships", which is entirely in keeping with the way that rave culture was portrayed by the media and the government.⁸⁸ In 1988, within months of acid house music becoming popular, it was branded as "a sinister an evil cult which lures young people into drug-taking" on national television, while in 1990 politicians spoke of its "innate corruption".⁸⁹ Implicit within this rhetoric is the assumption that a moral consensus has been broken. The assumption is that drug-taking is inherently bad, though the definition of drugs is not extended to include the legal vices like tobacco and alcohol. The motives of the government are questionable; if it is so deeply concerned about the welfare of its young people why might it have attacked the 'love drug' so vehemently? Perhaps the lobbying of government by alcohol-industry representatives like the Portman Group is responsible for the continued suppression of relatively safe, illegal substances like ecstasy. While the group claims that its aim is to "promote sensible drinking", commentators such as Professor Nick Heather have suggested that "the attempt to distance alcohol as a drug from other kinds of drug and give it a good face is the main activity of groups like the Portman Group". Indeed, after raising the recommended weekly alcohol limits in 1994, the British government was blasted by a representative of the World Health Organization in 1995 for "being in the pocket of the drinks industry".⁹⁰ This is an especially important point when it is taken into consideration that a report was released four years prior, highlighting alcohol's connection with at least 60 per cent of homicides, 75 per cent of stabbings and 50 per cent of domestic assaults.⁹¹ By comparison, a Chief Inspector made the following comment about rave parties in 1992: "I can safely say that it's totally different to any

⁸⁷ *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, p. 96.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁸⁹ *World In Action – A Trip Around Acid House* (documentary), ITV, 1988, accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fvtJztDW9o> on 23/03/2013.

⁹⁰ J. Carey, "Recreational Drug Wars: Alcohol Versus Ecstasy", 1997, <http://www.ecstasy.org/info/jim.html>, accessed 20/03/2013.

⁹¹ Murdoch D., Ross D, "Alcohol and Crimes of Violence: Present Issues", *Substance Use and Misuse* 25:9 (1990), p. 1080.

nightclub or similar event where alcohol is available ... the threat of violence just wasn't there, there was no fear of anybody setting about on each other or anything like that which you always have... I can honestly say that wasn't the case."⁹² Such information raises serious concerns about the influence of corporate interests in British politics.

As the government and the tabloids have played up the dangers of rave and drug culture, headlines such as "THIS IS NO PEACE AND LOVE SCENE" (The Daily Mirror, 02/09/1992), "ECSTASY MAKES YOU LOSE YOUR MEMORY" (The Daily Mirror 24/02/1998) and "Ecstasy peril to unborn babies" (The Sun, 23/10/1999) have become commonplace. They give an overwhelmingly negative impression to the skim-reader which has led to some misconceptions about drugs. A study of newspaper reports relating to drug fatalities in Scotland in the 1990s found that there was a bias in the reporting; "these results appear to indicate a tendency for the press to devote more column inches of newsprint to deaths characterised by **teenage, female, ecstasy use**, rather than to those of older, opioid/benzodiazepine using, males, which predominate in the toxicological statistics". The study demonstrated the ratio of actual deaths to reported deaths. For instance, every single ecstasy-related death was reported by the press, giving it a ratio of 1:1. Deaths from other drugs received much less attention: tobacco, paracetamol and diazepam had a ratio of 130,000:1, 265:1 and 48:1 respectively. Thus, the study concluded that this kind of press reporting is irresponsible: "there is a danger that this creates an unrealistic perception of drug problems".⁹³ The former doctor for *The Sun*, Vernon Coleman, wrote of the danger that these skewed perceptions can have:

By labelling cannabis, heroin, cocaine and the hallucinogens as illegal, the law makers and law enforcers have created a false sense of security among those who use drugs such as tobacco and alcohol. Those who use 'legal' drugs commonly assume that it is the more dangerous drugs that are 'illegal', and that by choosing to use legally available drugs they are protecting themselves from real hazards. This misconception is dangerous and leads to an enormous amount of illness and many thousands of premature deaths, for the legal and supposedly safe drugs are in practice considerably more dangerous than any of the illegal and supposedly dangerous drugs.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Despite its clear historical relevance and connection with previous British youth movements, rave culture has received no deep analysis within historical literature. Its appearance in sociology and anthropology journals suggests it is considered too recent a phenomenon to analyse from a historical perspective, though it is more likely the lack of consensus on such a controversial issue that has prevented this from surfacing. Considering the amount of attention given to Thatcherism within modern

⁹² *Rave* (documentary), made by Boris McGooligan (BBC, 1992), accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxhcQsJgg3E> on 09/12/2012.

⁹³ A. Forsyth, "Distorted? A quantitative exploration of drug fatality reports in the popular press", *International Journal of Drug Policy* 12 (2001), p. 446.

⁹⁴ Coleman, "The Drugs Myth".

history modules, today's History students would benefit from a more probing study into the response of Britain's youth to the end of the post-war consensus and the resultant structural unemployment. Furthermore, considering the powerful Legacy of the Thatcher years in terms social, cultural and political, the study of rave culture is now more appropriate than ever, considering its continued importance and accommodation within mainstream club culture.

The development of the rave culture in Britain can be viewed as part of a universal tradition of collective joy catalysed by specific socio-economic conditions. This "ecstasy born from of pain" has highlighted the shortcomings of the return to the nineteenth century paradigm of individualism.⁹⁵ The structural changes of the 1980s empowered the individual, insofar as the individual's own socio-economic position will permit. The rave culture demonstrates the response of individuals who chose an alternative to the prevailing paradigms dictated by the socio-political culture. It illustrates the power of people to change cultural norms while providing a clear showcase for the innate corruption of the British political system, with its protection of private interest at the expense of collective harmony.

The success of people like Adamski has been demonstrated how the growth of rave culture has inspired young people to take a chance in nascent creative industries. The culture also helped to rejuvenate British pop music, shifting the emphasis away from mass-produced commercial music to grass-roots self-expression. The fragmentation and accommodation of rave culture by Britain's political establishment demonstrates society's increased requirement for 'time out' from the pressures of postmodern material culture, with all of its shortcomings and failed promises. Though there is the increased danger that the rave itself becomes a mass consumer spectacle, the DIY underground character of rave is antithetical to the idea of a society of made up of passive spectacle-consumers, and is therefore challenging to the prevailing socio-political system.

The complete rejection of any move towards a more liberal drug policy has resulted in the criminalisation of hundreds of thousands of otherwise law-abiding citizens, while forming a huge black market for drugs. The growing demand for drugs has put more power into the hands of criminals, while the lack of action by the government constitutes a lack of compassion for the welfare of its own citizens. This response has been deliberate. The influence of private and corporate interest in politics has resulted in the abandonment of the post-war goal of full employment, leaving successive generations of young people out of work and with little to aspire to. The rave culture acted as a safety net, as host to new identities, communities and activities. Those involved, who took "Thatcher at her word and decided simply to help themselves to a slice of the action", have created a culture for themselves despite a deteriorating social environment.⁹⁶ The existence of an illegal drug market alongside a whole contingent of unemployed people has combined in such a way that the rave culture has continued to grow and spread love while simultaneously damage itself from within, as the morally-corrupt criminal gangs follow the Thatcherite

⁹⁵ The Birth of Tragedy, p. 20.

⁹⁶ S. Redhead quoted in *Gang Wars*, p. 69.

example and take what they can get.

Generations have been built on this new progressive paradigm of positive creative interaction; people have had to build their own way out of structural unemployment. The inherent corruption within government becomes ever more present each day. In a society that increasingly encourages us either to dwell upon the past or worry about the future, a powerful social movement led by young people has brought us to the realisation that it is now, in the moment, where happiness is to be found – and no amount of tabloid sensationalism or mass consumer spectacle can deter from this basic fact.

Heaven is a place on earth, and God is a DJ...

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