



## **IN WHAT WAYS HAS CRIMINOLOGY SOUGHT TO UNDERSTAND THE RAVE MOVEMENT AS ORGANISED DEVIANCE?**

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### **Introduction**

This article will discuss how criminology has sought to understand the rave movement as a form of organised deviance and the societal reaction to it. In order to do this, the article will first outline how rave culture can be observed as a working class reaction to social inequality, and how rave parties enabled individuals to escape the reality of their social position. It will then examine how the rave movement attempted to visibly resist mainstream culture through the use of style, symbols and rituals, before going on to outline how cultural criminologists argue that these subcultural tools also have internal and collective meanings to other members of this group. Finally, the societal reaction to rave culture will be explored and it will be highlighted how extensive media attention led to an increased criminal justice response to this perceived deviant group.

### **1 Raves: A Deviant Subculture**

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the emergence, explosion and decline of a distinctive deviant subculture in the UK, often referred to as 'rave culture'. Raves were grass-roots organized, anti-establishment and unlicensed all-night dance parties, featuring electronically produced dance music (such as techno, house, trance and drum and bass). Rave culture developed with an alternative lifestyle that resisted mainstream conventions. Both the behaviours that took place at raves (illegal drug use, violation of noise and public gathering ordinances) and the widespread popularity of them caused alarm among the media, parents and policy makers alike. Consequently, authorities sought to control raves through various

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social policies and criminal justice sanctions (Reynolds, 1999). Some of the most influential work on deviant subcultures comes from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Most theories that emerged from the CCCS identify the powerlessness of the working class as the main reasons for the development of deviant subcultures (Goulding et. al., 2002). Deviant subcultures are seen as a means by which disaffected members of society resist and rebel against the mainstream culture and escape their social reality.

Clarke and Jefferson (1975) argue that the styles, mannerisms, and actions of a deviant subculture are used in order to find a solution to the problems faced through a lack of material capital and lower social standing (Clarke et. al., 1975). Therefore, rave culture can be observed as the means by which ordinary working class people get together on weekends to escape the realities of their social position. Faced with the real prospect of individualism, privatisation, unemployment and general social unrest, a weekend of taking mood-enhancing chemicals and sweating away on the dance floor may seem like the perfect answer to any problems. However, although rave culture can be observed as a means of escape for working class people, it should be noted that the rave movement differs from other subcultures in that it was neither class nor age biased. Raves attracted individuals from all walks of life and social position, and therefore this perspective cannot be applied to the entire rave culture population (Goulding et. al., 2002). In relation to those who did seek an escape from their social reality, the structure of rave culture can be observed as being like the public house structure with the same function in society. That function is to work as a kind of safety valve or social control mechanism, with youth living for the temporary utopia of weekend hedonism rather than investing their idealism and energy into collective projects of political change. It can therefore be argued that the traditional role of working class consolation rather than resistance was played out in the rave movement with ecstasy replacing pints of beer (Reynolds, 1998).

The development of deviant subcultures can also involve the creation of a whole new world to inhabit without conforming to rules and conventions set out by authoritarian powers (Hall and Jefferson, 1993). Rave parties provided a surreal environment of free expression and unregulated indulgence which usually involved the use of mind and mood altering drugs. The use of illicit drugs was a key characteristic of rave culture, most notably ecstasy, LSD, and ketamine. The potential for a subculture to progress in its hedonism and refuse to conform to the bureaucratic rules and work routines of the dominant culture is outlined by Jock Young (1971) in his book *The Drug Takers: The Social Meaning of Drug Use*. In it, Young argues that some deviant subcultures look to submerge themselves into worlds which have values

and meanings that are not governed by an ethos of productivity (Young 1971). It can, therefore, be argued that rave parties were as much about escapism as they were about dance. The use of drugs, combined with the loud thudding music, colourful lights and the unconventional rave fashions, created a surreal environment removed from the conventions of everyday life.

Other writers such as Dick Hebdige (1979) argue that deviant subcultures (such as the rave movement) are normally portrayed as having undesirable lifestyles, values and attitudes by the dominant ideology, and essentially have little or no power within the mainstream. Therefore, perhaps, one of the only ways for them to reject the pressure that is placed upon them, and visibly display resistance to the mainstream is to create new meanings through style. The development of subcultures can be observed as a way in which societies' aesthetic rules are made visible by open rebellion. The clothes, activities and music of a subculture represent a direct challenge to symbolic order; style is therefore created by subcultures as a form of semiotic weapon that acts as noise against the silence of the dominant ideology (Thornton, 1995). The parent culture may find the styles displayed extremely offensive, especially when everyday items take on radically different meanings (Hebdige, 1979). In this respect, rave culture can be observed as another link in the subcultural chain that replayed and reworked the same themes of rebellion and resistance epitomized by the teddy boys of the 50s, the hippies of the 60s, or the punks of the 70s (Redhead, 1997). The rave movement had very obvious styles that signified its members were a part of this group, such as sampled music with repetitive beats, the use of drugs such as acid and ecstasy, cheap and baggy beachwear, psychedelic images and logos such as the yellow smiley faces, t-shirts with rave or anti-establishment messages, and fluorescent accessories (Melechi, 1993).

A clear example of rave culture rebellion and resistance to the mainstream is the way in which its music was delivered and distributed. This resistance came in the form of non-royalty paid samples, and independent non-profit white label records which went against the mainstream music market domination. Rave events were staged in dodgy warehouses, squats, or fields, and took revenue away from the licensed clubs; pirate radio stations were also used to promote the music even when commercial radio totally denied its existence (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999). The shared styles and practices of deviant subcultures such as the rave movement not only represent resistance to the dominant culture, but can also have internal meanings that speak symbolically to other members of the group. Cultural criminologists argue that subcultures are defined by elaborate conventions of appearance,

aesthetics, and stylized presentation of self that operate as repositories of collective meaning and representation for their members (Ferrell, 1999). Gelder and Thornton (1997) argue that deviant and criminal subcultures may even employ symbolic communication processes that transcend time and space. They describe this by stating:

The combination of widespread spatial dislocation and precise normative organization implies that subcultures are defined less by face-to-face interaction than by shared symbolic codes. (Gelder and Thornton 1997, cited in Ferrell, 1999: 403)

This argument can be supported by observing the most common activity of those who attended rave parties: dancing. Ravers' danced individually, but in unison with others around them. Their dancing simultaneously embodied the values of independence and connection, which runs consistently with rave cultures distinctive ethos called 'PLUR' (an acronym for peace, love, unity and respect) (Reynolds, 1999) and raves' collective identity (Anderson, 2009).

It is also important to recognise that subcultural choices are also consumer choices that involve fashion, leisure and a wealth of accessories that represent subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). Thornton (1995) reworks Bourdieu's theory of economic, social, and cultural capital, introducing the term 'subcultural' capital which 'confers status on its owner in the eye of the relevant beholder' (Thornton, 1995: 11). Increasing individual subcultural capital, or 'hipness', is a prime motivator for people within the rave movement. Being in the know, using appropriate language, wearing the right kind of clothes, and listening to the right kind of music are all ways of increasing one's subcultural capital. Therefore, deviant subcultures such as the rave movement cannot only be viewed as a way of rebelling against the parent culture, but also as a way or means by which people discuss and collect status within their own social worlds (Thornton, 1995).

## **2 Rave Culture in the Media**

Rather than looking at the group itself, other criminological perspectives have sought to understand the rave movement by observing the societal reaction to it, and the role the media played in creating and dissembling this form of organised deviance. Since its emergence, rave culture came under immense media scrutiny and negative criticism, normally as a result of the use of illicit drugs at raves. Initial coverage of rave culture was a positive one, with *The Sun* promoting the famous craze of 'Acid Smiley Face T-Shirts' and

describing the rave movement itself as 'cool and groovy' (Redhead, 1993). However, this soon changed and only two weeks after running the positive story on rave culture, *The Sun* linked the scene with rumours of the new drug ecstasy, and ran the headline 'Evil of Ecstasy' on 19 October 1988. The other tabloids, including *The Post* and *Today*, all ran similar stories, many on their front pages along with photographs of writhing masses of sweaty teenagers (Fantazia Rave Archive). One *Sun* headline entitled 'Spaced out!' is accompanied by such a photo, along with a caption saying, 'Night of ecstasy... thrill seeking youngsters in dance frenzy at the secret party attended by more than 11,000' (Fantazia Rave Archive). It can be argued that this media attention actually allowed rave culture to grow and develop. The sensationalised stories of drugs, dance and music acted as a form of advertising for the movement which attracted many other individuals (Goulding, 2000). Thornton outlines how:

Without tabloid intervention, it is hard to imagine a British youth movement... A tabloid front page, however distorted, is frequently a self-fulfilling prophecy; it can turn the most ephemeral fad into a lasting development. (Thornton, 1995: 132)

In addition, constant media reporting on rave culture served to maintain and reinforce its subordinate position. In order for any deviant subculture to exist, it has to be in the limelight but at the same time act as if exposure is not what it is looking for; in doing this, it states its difference within society by not being a part of the dominant culture all of the time (Hebdige, 1988). It has been argued that deviant subcultures such as the rave movement often become visible, are labelled (by themselves or others), come under media attention and are in the public spotlight for a while before they either disappear or are so widely diffused by the dominant culture that they lose their distinctiveness (Hall and Jefferson, 1993). This process is often referred to as a 'moral panic'. The classic outline of a moral panic is that provided by Cohen:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become deemed as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Cohen, 1973: 9)

Following its emergence, rave culture came under immense media scrutiny and reports often involved drug consumption in hedonistic environments (Shapiro, 1999). The behaviour of people involved was distorted and exaggerated, and dimensions of lawlessness were used

to connect rave culture to wider social ills and cultural decline (Osgerby, 1998). This coverage raised awareness of rave culture and the number of people attending raves escalated. The perceived rise in deviance was used to justify the newsworthiness of the subject and the media acted as self-appointed moral spokesmen, demanding action. Subsequently, new criminal justice policies were implemented and raves were raided frequently by the police (Collin, 1998), which led to the number of illegal raves decreasing and rave culture all but disappearing off the public radar.

Although the social reaction to rave culture suggests that it was subject to a moral panic that followed Cohen's stages, this model has three serious flaws that need to be revised if it is to apply to rave culture. First, it operates with a very narrow view of society and domination, and underestimates the abilities of members of the rave movement to express their own point of view. Second, it overestimates the consensus of media reaction and fails to distinguish between different kinds of media, including the niche and micro-media that rave culture produces itself. Third, the media are conceptualized as (mis)representing a social reality to a passive audience, when, increasingly, social reality is constituted through competing media representations that are decoded by a sophisticated public (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995). Although media discourse was initially concerned with the activities of those who attended raves, it increasingly shifted toward a more legal narrative as the criminal justice system became more involved in controlling the rave movement (Redhead, 1991).

### **3 Legal Responses to Rave Culture**

Rave culture was subjected to an escalating criminal justice response as different ways were sought to prevent unofficially organized rave events. An initial strategy was to enforce the Public Entertainments Act 1982, which required public entertainment to be licensed. However, this approach only had limited success as organizers were able to get around this measure by arguing that their parties were private functions (Critchler, 2000). The introduction of the Entertainments Act 1990 (often referred to as the 'Acid House Bill') increased penalties for unlicensed public entertainment and those found responsible for organizing rave events could be subjected to fines of up to £20,000 and receive a 6 months prison sentence. It also allowed for the confiscation of equipment used in these events (Merchant and McDonald, 1994). Redhead argues that this act had the potential 'to criminalize a whole section of the youth population' (Redhead, 1991: 93).

However, even this measure was insufficient and rave events continued to occur, normally in squats and warehouses, or at free festivals that were organised by new-age travellers. In 1993, Home Secretary Michael Howard targeted raves with New Age Travellers and squatters, and called for more police powers for the prevention of free festivals and raves. This led to the inclusion of a new set of criminal offences within the Criminal Justice Act and Public Order Act 1994. Section 47 of the Act made it an offence to make preparations to hold, wait for or attend a rave; Section 45 gave the police powers to arrest, without a warrant, trespassers failing to leave the site of a rave after being asked to do so by a police officer; and Section 49 gave the police powers to control traffic within a mile radius of a rave, including the authority to stop vehicles at a roadblock (Henderson, 1997: 10). The Act defined a rave as 'a gathering of a hundred or more persons, whether or not trespassers, at which music is played during the night', and that music being 'predominantly characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats' (Henderson, 1997: 11). This is a unique criminal justice response to a subcultural movement, as never before had a government considered a specific type of music so subversive as to prohibit it (Collin, 1998).

It can be argued that the Government's response to the rave movement was due to the popularity of punitive approaches to criminal justice policy. Tough-on-crime rhetoric and a punitive stance are often used by politicians in order to gain political capital (Bottoms, 1995). As a result, what the public and perhaps the media want can take precedence over the views of criminal justice professionals and academics. The introduction of legislation aimed at preventing rave parties can, therefore, be observed as being a populist measure riding on the back of the genuine public concern that was generated by the media. Although this punitive approach was popular with the majority and allowed for political points to be scored, it came at the price of further marginalising the few. As raves were enormously popular with a significant minority of teenagers and young adults (most of which were generally law abiding and responsible), the implementation and enforcement of prohibitive strategies – such as those outlined in the 1994 Act – often served to alienate this segment of the population from both government and the police (Scott, 2002). As a form of organised deviance, rave culture peaked in the summer of 1992, when the Techno Traveller Festival at Castlemorton Common drew an estimated 40,000 revellers. By 1993, rave culture was in decline as the introduction of government legislation enabled the police to stop illegal raves and to press charges against those who organised or attended them. There are, however, some pockets of resistance to the mainstream club culture. Free parties still frequently occur

in remote locations across the UK, and acid techno parties are a staple aspect of London's squat-rave scene (Reynolds, 1998).

## **Conclusion**

As highlighted throughout this discussion and with reference to the evidence cited, rave culture provides an excellent opportunity to observe theoretical developments on social deviance. Deviant subcultures can be seen to occupy a place of resistance and rebellion against the mainstream culture and this resistance is often displayed through the use of style, symbols and rituals. Therefore, the rave culture may be perceived as a vehicle for disaffected members of society to express a direct challenge to the dominant ideology. However, it may also be observed as a way in which individuals sought to escape the reality of their social position and immerse themselves in a world removed from the conventions of everyday life. In this world, the use of style, symbols and rituals can be seen as a form of internal communication which serves to reinforce the collective identity of the group. The rave movement can also be used as a good example of how deviant subcultures emerge in modern society, come under immense scrutiny by the media and are then subjected to criminal sanctions before fading away. Different criminological and sociological perspectives on deviance and criminality have allowed for this distinctive form of organised deviance to be explored and further understood. Although rave culture has all but disappeared, it is perhaps only a matter of time before the next form of organised deviance emerges. From the teddy boy to the raver, there has been a continual pattern of subculture emergence, which would suggest that deviant subcultures are now a staple aspect of modern society.

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