



Rave Culture and Control

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They came from mainland Europe and from all four countries of the UK – the big cities, the market towns, the fishing villages, from the hamlets of the Highlands and the decaying seaside towns of the east coast. They came in vans and buses converted into mobile cottages, in cars and jeeps, on motorbikes, in pick-up trucks and utility vehicles welded and accessorised into Mad Maxian war-wagons, in shining Shoguns bearing the logos of various superclubs: Cream, the Ministry of Sound. Some came on foot. And all of them, these refugees from the mainstream, came to dance, in that bowl in the mid-Wales hills; they came to commune and abandon. Be both autonomous and collective. They came to blueprint a possible future, to potentiate a point at which the celebration of the heart-beat and the quick skin and the proximity of flesh to flesh might be seen as a valid and valuable human endeavour. They came to both escape and create. In short, they came to feel vividly and excitedly alive and, for a while, they succeeded.

Then this happened:

Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994

Part V – Powers in relation to raves – Section 63

Powers to remove persons attending or preparing for a rave

(1) This section applies to a gathering on land in the open air of 100 or more persons (whether or not trespassers) at which amplified music is played during the night (with or without intermissions) and as such is, by reason of its loudness and duration and the time at which it is played, is likely to cause serious distress to the inhabitants of the locality; and for this purpose –

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(a) Such a gathering continues during intermissions in the music and, where the gathering extends over several days, throughout the period during which amplified music is played at night (with or without intermissions); and

(b) 'Music' includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats. ("Criminal Justice" 1994)

"Whether or not trespassers": the arrogation of criminality where none had hitherto been legislated is striking. This was centralised government openly declaring a susceptibility to Folk Devil hysteria as camouflage for control of the ungovernable crowd. This was the re-awakening of primitive terrors in the post-colonial mind:

the capacity for abandonment, for self-lessness in the rhythms and emotions of the group, is a defining feature of 'savagery' or otherness [...] signalling some fatal weakness of mind. As horrified witnesses of ecstatic ritual, Europeans [...] did learn, or imaginatively construct, something centrally important about themselves: that the essence of the Western mind, and particularly the Western male, upper-class mind, was its ability to resist the contagious rhythm of the drums, to wall itself up in a fortress of ego and rationality against the seductive wildness of the world. (Ehrenreich 2007: 9)

Further: encapsulated here is the terror of the Enemy Within, the underclass, the peasantry, the mob, those outliers of bourgeois control. In danced ritual – in carnival – is the disturbing negation of socio-political power: "it is impossible to retain one's regal dignity in the mad excitement of the dance. The deity may choose to possess – and speak through – a lowly shepherdess as readily as a queen" (Ehrenreich 2007: 44). The rave was a public, even flagrant, declaration of ungovernability; it was a palpable antidote to atomisation. It was a vision in microcosm of a society without power, without the imposition of power over others and as such it could not last. The gatherings in sand-dunes, in hills, in disused warehouses and in motorway culverts came to be only half-experienced, with a truncated and incomplete abandonment; one eye became alert for the approaching flashing blue lights, one ear for the wail of sirens behind the music's hammer and throb.

It seems an incredible assertion to make in 2019 but in 1994 the UK government attempted to outlaw a musical style. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJA) was a resentful and repressive piece of legislation concocted primarily to stamp on 'rave culture', percolated by a right-wing tabloid press into a public menace. For those involved in it the movement was, rather, more akin to an outbreak of peace; the tribal troubles of Thatcherite polarisation (manifested most starkly in the Miners' Strike and in football violence) dissolved in the rave, not only through the ingestion of empathogenic drugs but in the acknowledgement of universal desire and need to escape from drudgery. The "repetitive beat" clause in the CJA seemed bizarre at the time and is unthinkable now, with most popular mainstream music riffing off recurring signatures (and indeed the term was reclaimed at the time: see, for instance, the anthology *Repetitive Beat Generation*, edited



by Steve Redhead (2000)) and the ludicrous ambiguity of the description and proscription itself. In fact, the music played at raves was often disparate, and dictated only by mood: gabber, for instance, is incomparable to ambient chillout; both inhabit wildly differing soundscapes. The band Autechre produced a track called “Flutter”, expressly written to circumvent the CJA, in which no two bars had the same drum pattern; a sticker on the original EP advised DJs to “have a lawyer and musicologist present at all times to confirm the non-repetitive nature of the music in the event of police harassment”. Additionally, the “repetitive beat” tag requires no stretch in order to describe, say, the call of a hunting horn or the anthemic pomp of Last Night of the Proms.

It had some success, the CJA, in that it drove raves further underground and made them more difficult to organise and attend. An unintended consequence, however, was to politicise a large and predominantly young section of society; for all its energies, the rave scene was chiefly and, in any overt sense, apolitical, but the CJA provoked outrage, concretised in the many “Kill the Bill” marches that took place across the UK, one of which headed towards Downing Street before, in disturbing echoes of the Miners’ Strike and the Poll Tax Riots, being broken up by mounted police. The fierce and untamed essence of the rave had to come, after nearly two decades of grey Tory rule; cathartic release had to arrive in some form. And the “repetitive beat” simply went overground, to be absorbed into the mainstream (listen, for example, to the *BBC News* theme). Such popular politicisation lives now in the Extinction Rebellion events and in the anti-Brexit marches which, in direct contrast to their opposite numbers, invariably feature music and dancing and a shared energy which seeks and needs no scapegoat for sustenance beyond mockery and parody.

The intensity of the fear and concomitant repressive urges awakened by rave culture was and remains startling. The threat that it posed to the established hierarchical order was minimal in truth; tribal politics were largely absent and large groups of young people contained in one space in which they could harmlessly exhaust their energies would be, one imagines, acceptable to the prevailing rigid ideologies of late 80s/early 90s Britain. Large public gatherings which genuinely threaten the established order tend to be characterised by solemnity, homogeneity and enforced group-think, the “shedding of the individual soul and mind”, to paraphrase William Shirer (1990: 18). Most obviously, fascist rallies are staid and tightly controlled events in which autonomy is subsumed into an amorphous but sacrosanct “will”. Rave culture, in its surface untamedness, possessed a certain subversive humour and a mockery of authority immanent within it, but crowds are not power, and it is an egregious and repeated historical fallacy to assume that they are; consider as an example the negligible influence that the anti-war demonstrations had on Tony Blair’s decision to assist the USA in invading Iraq in 2003. Yet just as the fascist crowd was harnessed as a spur to and buttress of power, so can the “rabble” and the “mob” be, as a shibboleth of power, suppressed. Misrule is in and of itself the threat, and the



carnival is political; Ehrenreich's "ecstatic revolution" is there in the masks and the face paint, in the dissolution of rank and gender and ethnicity. Such egalitarianism can only ever be an outrage to hierarchical socio-political frameworks: to a society in thrall to status.

Raves were hardly spontaneous uprisings; they were organised through complex, clandestine, intricately co-ordinated forward planning, through surreptitious meetings in garage forecourts to share information, through coded messages passed between public call-boxes or mobile phones the size of house-bricks: whispers and rumours and sigils and signs which in their secret and specialised networks excluded any agent of control and coercion and can be seen as echoes of the outlawed hedge-schools in colonised Ireland or the meetings conducted in Cymraeg beneath the earth in Welsh mines. Rave happened, and it injected a serum into the body politic that continues to fight infection. Two days ago at the time of writing, after yet another legal defeat for the most right-wing government in decades, British Channel 4 news broadcast a flash celebration outside the Houses of Parliament; it began with cheering and jeering and was followed quickly by dancing to the repetitive beat of a drum.

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