A Commitment to Clubbing

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Smiling at a stranger in the dark confines of a hot and sweaty basement. Holding your arms up in the air, perhaps grasping the hand of someone nearby and cheering as the laser lights dip low over the crowd. Waiting for the bass-line to kick in so you can start stomping your feet on the sticky dance floor. The time nervously waiting in the queue to see your favourite DJ, hoping that the plans you have been making with your friends all week will come to fruition in one night of fun. It can be hard to put into words the commitment that many people hold towards clubbing, and indeed the intense enjoyment and joy clubbers garner from their time-out leisure pursuits.

Clubbing is not, for the most part, a commitment to getting high from licit and illicit drug use, as is so often depicted by the media, and by politicians across the Western world who dogmatically and piously fight the war on drugs. This is not to deny that some people and their lives become blighted from so-called "recreational" drug use. Clubbing is indeed a commitment to the hedonism encouraged by our 24-hour consumer culture, a controlled loss of control which for some people can spiral out of control. Yet it is also a commitment to partying while remaining respectful and courteous to those around you. Club culture holds the promise of tolerance towards others, of celebrating life together through music and dance, of accepting that for this moment, and often regrettably this moment alone, a group of strangers can have fun together without punch-ups occurring over knocked elbows and spilt pints.

Yet is this ethos of tolerance an apparition, the desert oasis mirage that club culture never reached? The divisions and distinctions within club culture have been highlighted by clubbers and cultural critics alike, as the idealistic "loved-up" dreams of the Acid House and Rave era in the U.K. dissolved with high-profile ecstasy deaths and the rise of urban gun culture. The loving dream, the story goes, turned into a living death. By the turn of the millennium Eminem was able to proclaim, "No one listens to Techno." British "superclubs" closed down (although others opened), or changed their music policies and promotion tactics to attract "Burberry-wearing beer boys." Sexually predatory behavior (supposedly) returned wholesale to the dance floor, making a mockery of the liberating versions of femininity that clubland promised female ravers. Alcohol and cocaine use rose within night-time leisure spaces, bringing with them governmental calls for crack-downs on the "binge drinking" that the licensed pub, bar and club industry encourages through "two-for-one" offers, happy hours and extended opening hours.

It's a gloomy picture indeed for dance culture, a culture that to many writing from left and feminist academic traditions appeared to amount to little more

than a misguided attempt to escape (or even to embrace through lawless entrepreneurialism) patriarchal capitalism. A culture that celebrated raw physicality over political consciousness. A culture of pleasure as opposed to political awareness. Yet for a significant minority of men and women across the globe, dance culture and clubbing stills hold its original promise of tolerance, peace and love. It is around this promise, and indeed based on the experiences of many contemporary clubbers, that the loving dream of dance club culture lives on despite regular pronouncements to the contrary. And it is around this promise that the everyday, even mundane subcultural practices of resistance to established orders of division through difference are manifest.

Who are these "clubbers"? They come from all walks of life. On any night out dancing in Manchester, U.K., you can meet people from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, of various ethnicities and sexualities. Encountering those unlike yourself in "real-world" terms is highlighted by dance club-goers as one of the attractions of clubbing, constructed as an alternative to the divisive discourse of the British establishment, wary as it is of outsiders and Others. Yet within and across clubbing spaces there remain barriers between ethnicities, even (or especially) in large urban clubs, which will often run nights for "black music" with a particular clientele, and run other nights for white, often "working class" ravers. Pleasure space segregation in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and age continues in contemporary clubland.

The unifying discourses of the British Acid House and Rave era are often ridiculed for being historically and culturally naïve, and for the most part this is a fair criticism. Yet this perhaps naïve ideal of peace, love and tolerance still forms the ethos of many clubbing spaces today, with, for example, "All Nations, All Persuasions" being encouraged to enjoy hard house and trance by one U.K. club promoter's publicity material. In many clubs in the U.K. there is a relatively heterogeneous clientele, with the rise of "polysexual" clubs promoting a "queer enough" attitude, and encouraging the blending of sexualities in predominately urban clubbing spaces.

Some dance club-goers do perceive themselves to be part of a subculture, or, as academics have more recently suggested, a "post-subculture." A commitment to the enjoyment procured from dancing, chatting and consuming all night often entails a commitment to an "alternative" life-world, or perhaps more of a commitment to an idealised and idealistic "alternative" way of life. The fact that clubbing involves (hedonistic) consumption does not necessarily undermine the possibility that clubbers form part of a politicised and politically active subculture or post-subculture. It is often assumed that drug-fuelled utopianism within the main and post-clubbing spaces involves nihilism of the self, rendering that self too incoherent to be a firm base for practices of resistance. Consumption thus undermines the possibility of politicized and resistant imaginaries.

Yet, historically and culturally speaking, consumption practices have long formed part of subcultural movements. In the case of clubbing it is the practice of consuming music (and more often than not recreational drugs) with others in particular spaces that forms the basis of the "movement." Yet for many clubbers,

consumption of music and drugs is not what clubbing is just about. It is about smiling at strangers, making friends with "randoms" that you meet on the night and trying to put the world to right during hours of "come-down" conversations. It is about trying to understand people's perspectives that may be different from your own, being willing to laugh at yourself and sympathise with the plight of others. It is in this sense perhaps that clubbers practise resistance to a (Western) worldview in which we take ourselves and our own lives too seriously without looking around at the plight of other people in a non-patronising manner, in which we are wary of strangers and what they might want from us and in which we expect the party to be sold to us rather than to be created by us through participation.

Clubbing may or may not be viewed as a predominately "political" or resistant practice depending on one's perspective as to what counts as political action. A subcultural movement involving practices of resistance must hold something dear that is, or that is perceived to be, under threat. Dance club culture is "alternative," even "resistant," in the sense that clubbing and related drug use frequently come under the scrutiny of the bastions of conservatism, who view such hedonism as a threat to the established moral order. What clubbers resist through a myriad of mundane and spectacular practices, from awareness-raising parties such as London's Pride or Berlin's Love Parade, to the wearing of T-shirts proclaiming "Life is Good if You Love" and "Work-Free Drug Zone," is the material and discursive power of an established anti-drug and anti-dance-music faction within contemporary consumer capitalism.

With the partial commercialisation of the U.K. rave scene in the early to mid 1990s, when unlicensed promoters were prevented by laws and enforcement agencies from putting on free and pay parties in fields and disused warehouses, "rave" changed to "clubbing" in mostly licensed urban spaces, spaces in which surveillance by enforcement agencies could be undertaken with greater ease. In addition, the success of the contemporary city bar scene (with associated problems of determined drunkenness, sessional drinking and alcohol-related violence) has been very much due to the liberalisation of licensing endorsed by U.K. central and local government, supported by the alcohol beverage industry's recommodification of alcoholic drinks when faced with dance clubs and dance drugs "enticing" young people away from "traditional" leisure pursuits and spaces. It would seem that certain forms of hedonistic intoxification are (relatively) acceptable in the eyes of the British establishment while others are perceived and discursively produced as hazardous and disruptive enough to warrant restrictive surveillance, and containment through legislation.

Dance clubs in the U.S. have been under threat for a number of years from harsh anti-clubbing laws such as 2001's Ecstasy Awareness Act and the CLEAN-UP Act. The names of such acts are examples of the linguistic battlelines drawn in the anti-club and -drug war. As with the U.K. media portrayal of female ravers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, contemporary American clubbers are portrayed as innocents and "slaves" to the beat in dank industrial spaces, who fall victim to ruthless promoters selling dirty drugs. Rudy Washington, then deputy mayor of New York, uncompromisingly declared in 2001, "We've been closing these little buckets of blood for about three years and paralysing them."

The paralysis of American dance club culture continues, with the Bush

administration bringing in the RAVE (Reducing Americans' Vulnerability to Ecstasy) Act in 2002, which became the Illicit-Drug Anti-Proliferation Law in 2003. With intense scrutiny of clubs that play dance music, the "succession of repetitive beats" so famously highlighted in the U.K.'s Criminal Justice Act (which has been recently tightened through the Anti-Social Behaviour Act), club owners and club promoters in major U.S. cities (most notably New York City) are becoming reluctant to risk the fines and imprisonment that result from club-goers consuming drugs on their premises.

The U.K. has a relatively liberal approach in comparison with the U.S., as characterised by harm-reduction initiatives such as the Greater Manchester Dance Safe and Door Safe schemes. Such multi-agency initiatives acknowledge that the use of recreational drugs is likely to occur in dance club spaces and encourage club owners and promoters to act responsibly towards their clientele, for example through the provision of free drinking water, "chill-out" areas and trained paramedics. Clubbers are often grateful for being treated in such a mature manner. Indeed, acting responsibly, and in particular keeping an eye on clubbing friends and other clubbers who might get into difficulties through substance consumption, overheating and the like, is embedded in the dance club and recreational (illicit) drug use culture, a fact often overlooked by those legislators.

Substance use has always been and seems likely to continue to be part of club culture. Clearly, "recreational" substance use can cause pain and suffering for some clubbers, their friends and family. Yet research shows that even at the most serious end of the club drug-using population, many clubbers monitor their intake in order to manage the detrimental effects it may have on their personal health and safety. Substance use in clubbing spaces, and in post-clubbing spaces such as the chill-out, is a controlled loss of control, usually sanctioned by other clubbers. Many clubbers make it their business to find out about the possible dangers of recreational drug use, and remain largely reticent about the use of harder drugs such as crack cocaine and heroin.

This is all part of the processes of subcultural distinction, whereby certain patterns of behaviour are deemed either acceptable or unacceptable by some social groupings, but it also belies the responsibility that the majority of clubbers hold towards themselves, their fellow clubbers and the lives they wish to continue to lead, for example holding down continuous employment or a place at college. Many clubbers speak of feeling responsible for the image that clubbing has, hoping, perhaps naively, that acting decently towards fellow clubbers, club staff, police, indeed anyone they encounter on their excursions around the night-time economy, will cast their commitment to partying in a better light.

Commitment to clubbing costs money, which curtails the demographic of who is able to regularly attend clubbing events. Yet the do-it-yourself ethic has always been and continues to be part of club culture. I recently attended a night put on by a group of young "Scallies" (a somewhat derogatory term for white working-class young people in Manchester). Between them they had pooled enough money to hire out a small club space in the city centre and print

a limited number of flyers and CDs. A young lad, dressed in the obligatory tracksuit bottoms and hooded top, stood at the decks, tears running down his face as he simultaneously gestured to the vinyl playing and the crowd. His enthusiasm for the tune caught the crowd who cheered him on as he shouted "I love this tune! I love this tune!" These lads are from the same or similar socioeconomic group as those who are barred from many of the more prestigious nightclubs across the U.K., and who are known for their petty criminality, macho posturing and trouble-making. Yet clubbing, DJ-ing, and participating in dance music culture have meant this particular lad is able to stand up in front of his Scally mates and cry with happiness in a distinctly non-macho manner.

Clubbing, the scourge of conservative politicians, offers meaning and even stability to many people, especially young people, who are trying to find their way in the world. Clubbing can offer a sense of identity which goes beyond the antics of a Saturday night. It can have an impact upon a person's sense of self, their identifications with others and their sense of belonging in sometimes confusing and menacing urban spaces. Clubbing can make a city your own. It can give people the confidence to go out and try things they previously assumed they would be unable to do, such as learning to mix dance music on decks, or travelling to different parts of the country/world to visit other clubs. One of my clubbing survey respondents admitted never having talked to a gay person before he moved to an urban area and started going clubbing. He now counts several gay men among his friendship group and detailed a heightened awareness of the persecution that gay people have endured throughout history. In this sense, clubbing can change a person's outlook on life and their outlook on the lives of others.

Regular attendees at clubbing events take on the name of the spaces they frequent, producing identifications with other clubbers. You can ask of someone, "Are you a clubber?" and an affirmative answer brings with it a number of culturally embedded notions about what that person may (and may not) be like. It is through these mundane and culturally embedded notions of what "a clubber" is, and the related tribal identifications that form part of dance music culture, that the possibility of clubbing as a (post)-subculture is enacted. Recent work in cultural studies, youth studies and sociology have questioned the usefulness of subculture as a way of understanding the diverse range of youth groups in today's supposedly "postmodern" world.

It may be the case that subcultural studies needs to better define its terms, with reconceptualisations regarding "neo-tribes," "substreams" and "micro-networks" being deployed to capture youth movements in a constant state of fragmentation, flux and fluidity. Yet the provision of stability and order to sometimes chaotic lives, the possibility of an internalised sense of identity from clubbing, and the creation of sustained friendships through involvement in club culture are all aspects of identification with an (imagined) clubbing community which can be overlooked in talk of postmodernist "style surfing." It may be that this "community" is imagined in the sense that it does not reside in one specific locale, and does not have constant symbolic markers through which membership is displayed (not many clubbers wear clubbing gear to the office), yet it remains in the imaginaries of its participants and, I argue, provides a sense of resistance to societal norms that delimit the possibilities of pleasure through discourses of

the "youth problem," criminality and subjects depoliticised through ruthless and reckless hedonism.

Clubbing friendships are one example of the possibility that being committed to club culture amounts to more than the blind pursuit of hedonistic pleasure. Within clubbing spaces attendees remain resistant to prevalent notions of "stranger danger," displaying openness through physical contact, sharing water, "chilled" conversations and the "all-back-to-mine" ritual where randoms are invited into other clubbers' homes to extend the pursuit of pleasure in domestic spaces. There are clearly safety issues surrounding such practices, with research demonstrating gender differences in perceptions of safety and experiences of danger in different clubbing spaces and times. Risky practices such as "drug-driving" should not be glossed over. Yet as the fear of crime and stranger danger (sometimes unfounded) renders people immobile in their own homes and communities, the relaxing of wariness towards others in urban spaces should be encouraged if (and perhaps only if) certain processes are put in place to improve the safety of clubbers, such as female-only taxi firms and more thorough checks on the criminal records of security staff.

The relaxing of social norms surrounding interactions with strangers is part of the clubbing experience, and in a sense is resistant to contemporary trends towards gated communities and the heightened suspicion of the feared Other (increased stop-and-searches in the U.K. on members of ethnic minorities being an apt example here). But are clubbers really part of an open, globalized community, a geographically dispersed post-subcultural counter-culture that resists the political world order through diverse practices of resistance? This seems a very grandiose claim for a "subculture" based on the consumption of "repetitive beats" and recreational drugs. Is clubbing "merely" hedonistic consumption in a capitalist consumer society, a subcultural statement on the individualism of contemporary life, or is it evidence of an ever-changing liberatory imagination among those following the age-old recreational pursuit of dancing to music?

Perhaps we find a partial response to these multiple possibilities through looking less at the spectacular hands-in-the-air aspects of club culture than at the mundane practices that clubbers undertake to do being a clubber. It is within such mundane practices—searching for the next night out, using mobiles to organise groups of friends, purchasing substances, talking about the night to come, checking on friends once in the clubbing space, congregating at friend's houses for chill-out—that the spectacular aspects of clubbing and clubbing as a sense of identity are built, and the seeds of "revolutions of everyday lives" are sown.

As a committed clubber myself, I find it hard not to become caught up in club culture's idealistic self-regard, and in turn disregard the many problems that dog contemporary club culture. For one, clubbing as a possible form of (subcultural) resistance involves consumption practices that are open to the relatively few people who can afford them. Socioeconomic exclusion (i.e. prohibitive entry fees) and sociocultural practices of exclusion (i.e. racist door policies)

regrettably continue. There remain fissures within club culture across lines of income, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and age. Yet these fault-lines have been breached by many clubbers, who actively seek out and create dance music events with a varied clientele, who promote tolerance to others through awareness-raising campaigns and who try to participate in local communities through charity club nights. A commitment to clubbing, negatively perceived by many in positions of power across the Western world, can entail a commitment to celebrating difference, practicing tolerance and celebrating life as it is while attempting to move closer to an ideal of life as it could and should be.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Jackson, Paul. 2004. *Inside Clubbing: Sensual Experiences in the Art of Being Human.* Oxford and New York: Berg.
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