

Rave New World?

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As the ecstasy debate continues with the recent sensationalised Daily Mirror anti-Ecstasy campaign, and the 'All about E' Guardian discussion; the general emphasis as always, and not surprisingly, has been on the negative aspects of E – the consequences and the oft quoted statistics of between 50 and 60 casualties from E since 1988; (incidentally drink causes an estimated 28,000 fatalities in Britain per year [Melody Maker 8/6/96]). Even the so called progressive attitudes of the various drug information agencies and experts concentrate on possible harm and side effects. But what about the positives? Are there any? Can millions of people each week be wrong? Does raving /Ecstasy have any place within revolutionary politics? Is it anti-revolutionary? How has it affected the social environment of Britain?

Social Environment

“...The turn of the decade and the pop clock begins to bring politics into fashion as organised raves and warehouse parties are busted, banned and trashed by cops throughout Britain. Just south of Leeds, the biggest mass arrest ever seen in this country...during one large outdoor rave.. the authorities are putting the scare on pop, dance music, new (different) drugs, people organising outside the established clubs.. the threatening, sexist, macho atmosphere connected to night-clubs is swamped by something new, exciting and even joyous...”

(Chumbawamba – Showbusiness!)

As Chumbawamba suggest, the advent of raving and the accompanying use of Ecstasy has positively changed the social life of many; especially women. Nicholas Saunders, in his second work about Ecstasy, Ecstasy and The Dance Culture puts forward two possible reasons for this positive transformation. The first, a purely biological point, proposes the idea that as Ecstasy is a sexual suppressant, women are able to enjoy themselves free from sexual advances and hassle from men, “...Traditional alcohol-based events always had an undertone of trying to score sexually through flirting and small talk...”[Saunders – Ecstasy and The Dance Culture] The second, offers the idea that traditional cultural values are being rejected, “...Although many young people in the dance scene now drink and do not take ecstasy, the normal way to behave is still without small talk or sexual aggression...”.

It is quite probable that both of these points are true; as a sexual suppressant, especially for men, Ecstasy focuses the users attention on other things- namely the music and dancing. The result, more often than not, is a more relaxed and friendlier atmosphere; especially for women. This atmosphere perpetrates the desire for more of the same, and this is where the rejection of traditional cultural values could be seen to come into play.

Breaking Down Barriers

Another case in point, illustrating this combination, is that of the rave scene in northern Ireland. As the scene developed and became popular around 1994, many young people (between the ages of 14 and 20), both Protestants and Catholics, became involved. The difference between this social scene and the pre-rave culture was that they became involved together. Saunders explains further;

“...I heard rumours that the effect of young people taking Ecstasy at raves in Northern Ireland was to break down sectarian barriers. In the summer of 1994, just before the IRA ceasefire, I spent 3 days in Northern Ireland... I interviewed teenage kids at a rave event in the Catholic club with a home video camera...lots of them were keen to tell me about the friendships they had made with members of the opposite sect who, they assured me, they would never have met otherwise...”

Without wanting to suggest that years of political conflict could be solved by dance music and E, Saunders’ Northern Ireland experience does illustrate the existence of the two points mentioned which could account for the change in the participants social behaviour. Aggression is gone, leading to the breaking down of barriers hence the rejection of traditional cultural values i.e. catholic only and Protestant only clubs, “...We’ve never known anything but hatred... It’s always the same: them over on one side, you on the other, except at raves...”.

Raving is not the only recreational activity where the participants have experienced behaviour changes, due to the use of Ecstasy. Although also involved in the dance/E scene, football supporters, from the 1991/92 season, showed a massive reduction in the amount of involvement they had in incidences of football violence and associated arrests. (The Independent 8/92 – a study.) Saunders cites a particular example of Manchester United and Manchester City fans, notorious for their violent clashes. He describes his experience of earlier Derby games (1989 & 1990) as being predictably violent and nothing out of the ordinary. Then he relates the first Derby game in the 1991/92 season;

“...By this time something quite remarkable had happened. Many of the hardcore lads from both United and City had spent most of the summer dancing the weekends away to the sounds of house music at raves fuelled by the drug Ecstasy. They had done this together! They had got into a routine of meeting up at rave clubs and taking Ecstasy in groups comprising both United and City lads...United’s fans moved off, there were, as usual, several hundred of them. But from the vantage point of the same bridge I had stood on two seasons earlier, I could hardly believe that this group was largely made up of those same young men who had looked like they were going to war. This time they looked more like they were going to Glastonbury festival!...The match went off with hardly any trouble and afterwards United and City’s lads once again danced the night away... it could never have happened before E...”

Addiction

Some critics of ecstasy have argued that although E is non-addictive, in terms of physical withdrawal symptoms, it is probable that it is psychologically addictive. This view can be given some credence as Saunders explains, “...Many European users do take Ecstasy every weekend and are psychologically dependent...”. However, he also states that, “...MDMA (Ecstasy) becomes less attractive with increased use...it’s debatable whether it is the scene or the drug that they are addicted to ...”. In the short time that I have been involved in the scene (approx. 14 months), I have never come across a person who I have considered to be addicted to Ecstasy. On the contrary, I have met many people who have gone weeks, months and even years without taking E. I myself have gone months at a time without taking, or feeling the need to take it.

Brave New World

Another criticism bandied about, regarding E, is its potentiality to create a 'Brave New World'; in which people accept their lot, and all desire to fight for a better world is 'drugged' out of them. As every remotely awake and sane person will realise, we already have plenty of devices about which attempt to coerce us into such a position: cars, dishwashers, videos, CD's, houses, carpets, wallpaper, etc. the list is endless. And lets not forget all about the perfectly legal drugs which could be said to do a much better job of numbing the mind than E, such as Benzodiazepines or anti-depressants such as Prozac.

Revolutionary?

So, can raving/Ecstasy unite enemies and bring peace where there is war? Of course not. Violence and wars still exist and will always prevail, until capitalism is eradicated. Raving/E, football, drinking, rock climbing, horse racing, etc. are all temporary releases from the mundanity of our existence under capitalism. None of these activities or any other leisure pursuit is revolutionary or, for that matter, anti-revolutionary. Ravers and the rave scene are as much targets for exploitation within Capitalism as every other consumer, as Arch Stanton points out,

“...The real threat of exploitation comes once again from the proliferation of would-be shamans amongst the state-funded cohorts of drug workers and their academic hangers-on. The former can barely contain their excitement...”

[‘What Future For The Real Raver’-Arch Stanton — Here and Now no. 14. 1993].

So once the experience is over its back to the real world of wage slavery, poverty and desperation, and either fighting to end these afflictions of capitalism, (and hence capitalism itself) or not.

In conclusion then, to be under any illusion that E/rave culture has any revolutionary power is to be living in a world of make believe. It is one experience out of many (although one of the best experiences I have ever had) which helps us to endure our existence as best we can. It will not do away with football violence on a large scale, or work where the Northern Ireland peace talks have not; but something which gives its participants (especially women) a break from “...the threatening, sexist, macho atmosphere connected to night clubs...”, and indeed most other forms of ‘normalised’ social interaction, is, I believe, a progression, and, as much of a liberation of the social environment as is possible in a capitalist world.

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