

Book Review: Youth Drugs, and Nightlife

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Youth, Drugs, and Nightlife, by **Geoffrey Hunt, Molly Maloney** and **Kirstin Evans**.
New York, NY: Routledge, 2010. 274pp. ISBN: 9780415374736

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The opening line of this book's Introduction asks why anyone should write "another book on raves" in 1999, given that the height of this scene passed nearly two decades ago. Although this is hardly the most inviting start for the reader, it quickly becomes clear that what has passed is the salience of rave to the media, lawmakers and, consequent levels of academic interest (research funding). This does not mean that this scene has gone away, nor that the world of *Youth, Drugs and Nightlife* is restricted to raves.

Indeed, this time lapse presents an opportunity to fill in the gaps in our understanding of rave. To many who were involved in rave research a decade or more ago (this reader included), these gaps will be familiar themes, however it may only be now that the 'moral panic' over ecstasy has subsided that we are free to discuss the obvious without fear of recrimination.

The book argues that there has recently been a shift away from research which pathologizes youthful drug use (the 'problem paradigm'), often using quantitative 'epidemiological' methods, towards (mainly) qualitative research, that attempts to understand why youth engage such activities.

This shift in research emphasis becomes the starting point for the book discussing various lacunas, which become recurrent themes throughout its pages. Under-researched issues such as users' agency, pleasure, gender (especially masculinity), 'glocalization' (the virtual world) and cultural contexts are explored. Though whether quantitative methods could have investigated these is not discussed.

Perhaps what is most pleasing is that this book documents the rave scene from the perspective of its participants, who describe themselves as neither passive victims of a drug epidemic (like swine-flu) who *must* be helped, nor as dangerous risk-takers of a type requiring a more punitive intervention. Instead, a picture is painted of 'flexible' drug use patterns, neither uncontrolled (addiction) nor meticulous (as with steroids). Nor do they passively ignore risk. Indeed negotiation of risk, including drugs' illegality, is cited as a reason for use, as in Young's "voluntary illicit risk taking" (p.25). In Chapter 7 the value of drug prevention literature's focus on risk is questioned. If this is distant from users own experiences then it is hardly surprising that such prevention strategies have failed them.

As well as having neglected users' agency, the book argues that research has also failed to place this use in context. By focusing on this isolated behaviour, research has contributed to a process of (Wagner's) 'decontextualization' (p.120) of drug use. Rather than the 'routinization of caricature' (p.78), portrayed by the media and reflected in much drug research, ravers are otherwise unremarkable citizens (voters?). This begs the question - How much is all this (agency, pleasure and 'othering') also true of other drug subcultures including those at the problematic end of the spectrum?

The book sets out to be the first in-depth sociological account examining the rave/ecstasy scene in the USA. To date, most research into this now global phenomenon has been conducted in the UK, especially England (and Australia). This may reflect the more 'mainstream' adoption of rave culture in these countries during the early 1990s. Much of the historical material here may be familiar to the lay public of the UK, but new to the US reader. A comparable book might be an in-depth analysis of English hip hop.

Rave/ecstasy became popular more recently in the US, and never attained the level of research attention that the more mainstream hip hop youth culture or more demonized methamphetamine has. However, this lacuna hides the extent, diversity and difference (from the English scene) of American rave culture. Chapter 4 details how this relative paucity of academic attention reflects a greater lack of familiarity with the scene amongst the American public and lawmakers.

One of this book's strengths is its analysis of rave as a global youth culture. This exploration of 'glocalization' details how rave, based on the Ibiza-English template, spread across the globe, often virtually, to be refracted through local cultures. Chapter 3 compares three divergent local scenes; the 'gabber scene' of Rotterdam, Netherlands (which this Scottish reader can identify with), Hong Kong, China (where ecstasy is prominent at present according to recent UN Office of Drugs & Crime data), and the authors' own San Francisco scene (an area with a pre-Ibiza history of ecstasy and dance-drug use). These geographical areas are found to display generic global similarities, yet also their own unique local differences and internal divisions (by social class, age, gender-orientation, language or ethnicity).

This theme is advanced in the final chapter by the additional analysis of the San Francisco's Asian diaspora, and how identity or agency impact upon levels of involvement in the local 'electronic dance music' scene. However ecstasy use among other groups appears missing (e.g. rural, working class or African-Americans). Also how 'ecstasy' quality varies across sub-populations.

Chapters 9-10 are perhaps the most groundbreaking. Here the effects of two drugs (ecstasy and alcohol) upon gender are compared, and the concept of gender is even applied to the substances themselves. Ecstasy is seen as subverting normative male roles, alcohol the opposite transgression. Given that much previous gender analysis has focused on the experiences of women in the dance scene, the highlighting of MDMA/rave culture's (well-known) effect on male behaviour is most commendable (e.g. reducing violence / predatory sexual activity, and participants using this as justification for MDMA over alcohol). This apparent gender convergence might be compared against recent explorations of alcohol intoxication and hyper-masculinity (i.e. increased violence and risk taking) among women in the UK's 'binge drinking' culture which followed rave.

Perhaps what this book illustrates best is how rapidly youth nightlife cultures evolve, meaning that by the time in-depth analyses have been conducted, the quantitative surveys are already flagging-up 'something else'.

One minor quibble, the book's cover conveys a shadowy 'underworld' impression at odds with the text's stance against the 'othering' of youth and drugs.