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# Journal of Drug Issues

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## CONFRONTING THE PROHIBITION MODEL: GERMAN DRUG POLICY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

**Lorenz Böllinger, Stephan Quensel,  
Henning Schmidt-Semisch, Heino Stoever,  
Bruce Bullington, Daniel Maier-Katkin**

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## CONTENTS

*JOURNAL OF DRUG ISSUES*

- 357 Introduction: German Drug Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
*Bruce Bullington, Daniel Maier-Katkin*
- 363 Recent Developments Regarding Drug Law and Policy in Germany and the European Community: The Evolution of Drug Control in Europe  
*Lorenz Böllinger*
- 379 Exclusion and Extinction: The Fight against Narcotics in the Third Reich  
*Holger Mach*
- 395 Cannabis Consumption in Amsterdam, Bremen and San Francisco: A Three-City Comparison of Long-term Cannabis Consumption  
*Susanne Borchers-Tempel, Birgitta Kolte*
- 413 Crack Cocaine in Germany: The Current State of Affairs  
*Heino Stoever*
- 423 Crack Cocaine Use in Hamburg's Open Drug Scene  
*Katja Thane*
- 431 Socio-cultural and Psychological Aspects of Contemporary LSD Use in Germany  
*Susanna Prepeliczay*
- 459 Pill Kick: The Pursuit of "Ecstasy" at Techno-Events  
*Ronald Hitzler*
- 467 Broken Home or Drug Using Peers: "Significant Relations"?  
*Stephan Quensel, Paul Mcardle, Aoife Brinkley, Auke Wiegersma  
with M. Blom, M. Fitzgerald, R. Johnson, B. Kolte,  
I. Michels, A. Pierolini, R. Pos, I. Stoeckel*
- 491 Primary Drug Prevention: Developments in Germany since the 1970s  
*Peter Franzkowiak*
- 503 Drug-substitution Treatment in Germany: A Critical Overview of Its History, Legislation, and Current Practice

- 523 Heroin-based Treatment  
*Ingo Ilja Michels*
- 543 The Efficacy of Forced Treatment  
*Harald Hans Koerner*
- 553 Drugs and Driving: Dangerous Youth or Anxious Adults?  
*Lorenz Böllinger, Stephan Quensel*
- 567 The Influence of Drug Policy on Transportation Policy Decisions  
*Juergen Neumeyer*
- 573 Drug Substitution Treatment and Needle Exchange Programs in German and European Prisons  
*Heino Stoever*
- 597 Consumption Rooms: A Middle Ground between Health and Public Order Concerns  
*Heino Stoever*
- 607 The Medical Use of Cannabis in Germany  
*Franjo Grotenhermen*
- 635 Drug Checking: Monitoring the Contents of New Synthetic Drugs  
*Artur Schroers*
- 647 Controlled Smoking: Implications for Research on Tobacco Use  
*Birgitta Kolte, Henning Schmidt-Semisch*
- 667 Controlled Drinking as a Treatment Goal in Germany  
*Joachim Koerker*
- 689 What Do Hamburgers and Drug Care Have in Common? Some Unorthodox Remarks on the McDonaldization and Rationality of Drug Care  
*Uwe E. Kemmesies*
- 709 An Alternative to Contemporary Forms of Drug Control  
*Henning Schmidt-Semisch, Bettina Paul*
- 721 Appendix A: The System of "Accepting Drug Work" in Germany

## INTRODUCTION: GERMAN DRUG POLICY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

BRUCE BULLINGTON, DANIEL MAIER-KATKIN

### PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

This issue of the *Journal of Drug Issues (JDI)* was first conceived about three years ago in conversations among Bruce Bullington, the editor of the *JDI*; Daniel Maier-Katkin, Dean of the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida State University (FSU); and Lorenz Böllinger, then Dean of the law faculty at Bremen University. For several years members of the FSU faculty (including members of the *JDI* editorial board) had been involved in a series of international initiatives directed at exploring possibilities for criminological research in other countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe; relationships were established with scholars and professionals throughout the region. The importance of this work, beyond the inherent value of cross-cultural study (especially in a field concerned with drug use, policy and research – where it is immediately clear that things are not the same everywhere), derives from the extraordinary transitions underway all across Europe. In the west, the European Union has emerged as a reality of still undefined centrality; and the entire continent has been transformed by the fall of communism, the opening up of the east and concomitant population movements, and transnational crime and unrest not known in Europe in more than 50 years. For all of these reasons, the editor of *JDI* thought it important to provide readers with cutting edge scholarship by European experts on drug use, policy, and research. This special issue on Germany is the fourth in a series of special presentations that include Volume 28, Number 1 (Winter 1998) on England and Wales; Volume 29, Number 3 (Summer 1999) on Holland; and Volume 29, Number 4 (Fall 1999) on Central and Eastern Europe. Two additional special issues are underway: one on injection rooms throughout Europe and the other on emerging drug policy in the Czech Republic.

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## PILL KICK: THE PURSUIT OF "ECSTASY" AT TECHNO-EVENTS

RONALD HITZLER

*Skimming through current publications about "Techno and Drugs" without looking into the more detailed distinctions between them, one gets the impression that the increase in the use of ecstasy (MDMA) and the growth of the Techno-scene, especially in the 1990s, are highly correlated. In fact, most ecstasy users identify themselves as Techno-fans, and those Techno-fans who consume drugs generally prefer ecstasy. It has also been suggested that the specific active ingredients of all amphetamine derivatives marketed under the catchall term "ecstasy" are pharmacologically psychotropic. But these active ingredients are not the main problem in the ongoing ecstasy boom.*

In this article the writer investigates several aspects of the relationship between specific characteristics of the Techno-culture and the preference for ecstasy and other so-called party drugs among its adherents.

All that we know about the actual origins of the Techno-culture stems from the stories that have subsequently been told about those events. According to these accounts, about 15 years ago there were huge, spontaneous parties that had been autonomously organized taking place at more or less deviant venues whose locations were known only to insiders. The events themselves were described as consisting of night-long dancing to rhythmical sound carpets of purely electronic music. It is not known exactly when the idea germinated in that scene to enhance the dance experience by consuming psychoactive substances, or how the special qualities of certain amphetamine derivatives were discovered in this regard.

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Despite these gaps in our knowledge about these early events, we are relatively familiar with the structures of the Techno-scene as a phenomenon of contemporary youth culture. In a general sense, these events are attended by scores of people who either reveal or conceal diverse activities having to do with Techno. The term "Techno" refers to a certain collective lifestyle, represented by various types of repetitive electronic music, in particular patterns of dance, special attitudes and unique kinds of sociability. At the present time, around 1.5 million German youths regularly participate in Techno events. Another 2 million persons are occasional participants and report frequently listening to Techno music. More than two thirds of the participants are male. They range in age from 14 to 43 years, with an average age of about 21. Interviews conducted with participants suggest that they spend substantial amounts of money on these parties and events. Among this study's respondents, more than half said they spend between about \$225 and \$676 per month for recreational activities, or \$2,700 to \$8,100 yearly. This group constitutes what we have identified as an "organizational elite" among Techno scene members.<sup>2</sup>

A heterogeneous, well-connected organizational elite manages the entire infrastructure of the Techno-scene, with the exception of occasional small-scale illegal events. In particular these persons produce and distribute information about the events, organize the logistics of great "events" (Mega-Raves, rave tourism, street parades), book clubs, hire disc jockeys, and produce and procure techno-specific records and CDs. Some members of this elite are also involved in the production of commercialized scene clothes and accessories. A further and essential function of the organizational elite consists in locating legal sponsors for the events. In the past, they have successfully induced major companies like the German Telekom, Camel, Sony, Mixery and Red Bull to place paid ads in Techno publications and to act as vendors at Techno events.

At this time the writer does not know whether there are close links between the organizational elite and illegal drug traffickers. However, there are some indications that there are significant differences between members of the organizational elite and other participants in the scene, especially regarding their attitudes toward, and patterns of, drug use. It is clear that managers and legally responsible persons (such as DJs, event organizers and magazine producers) publicly advocate drug abstinence. Their reasons for doing so are partly to avoid personal trouble, and partly for moral reasons. Despite these public claims, however, some members of the organizational elite are known to be avid consumers of expensive alcoholic beverages and cocaine.

Techno events and those enthusiasts who consider themselves connoisseurs of them are found largely in Techno clubs. There is some evidence that different forms of drug consumption are related to particular musical styles and preferences. Kerstin Greiner suggested that, ever since "Mother Ship Techno" (one of many sub-genres of techno music), proclivities for certain types of Techno music have been linked to

particular drugs. This has been said to be especially true for speed, cannabis, and hallucinogens. Those claims could not be empirically verified here, however, and therefore must remain in the realm of speculation.

All this cannot – at least at first sight – be valued as epidemiologically relevant. Two drug types have been particularly relevant to Techno: alcohol and amphetamine derivatives. These substances are conspicuous in Techno culture and differ from those found at other music and dance scenes: at "mega events" (gigantic rave parties such as Mayday, Time Warp, Nature Onr, Tribal Gathering and rave weekends as they have been developing as offshoots of great street parades).

The term "rave" is only being used here in a rather narrow, localized sense. It refers to special events taking place in locations that are large enough to accommodate a party attended by thousands and even tens of thousands of Techno music enthusiasts. These giant parties often last for ten or twelve hours or even longer, sometimes continuing for an entire weekend. The typical locations for raves are big halls or hall complexes, or open air settings. These large-scale raves offer a variety of options to participants; several dancing areas are at their disposal and a number of DJs and DJanes are playing different styles of Techno music in different locations.

In most instances these events require extensive planning and preparation. Considerations include, for example, the logistics of food supply and waste disposal, safety measures, health care (especially for problems related to the extreme intensity of sound and light), room ventilation, methods for dealing with the general physical exhaustion experienced by dancers, hygienic problems, and a variety of other concerns. Due to the conditions that characterize these events, nearly all basic human needs and existential desires for well-being are systematically and overwhelmingly frustrated. At the conclusion of one of these eight or ten hour parties, the outside observer and non-participant might have the impression that the scene resembles an apocalyptic movie. Participants appear to be exhausted and spent. Most can be found sitting, squatting, lying, or just hanging around; all are pale, totally worn out, and wearing dirty clothes.

Despite their shabby outward appearances, however, none of these young people are grumpy or sullen, low-down or desperate. On the contrary, their tired faces typically reveal something like complete relaxation, satisfaction, even bliss. Some obvious questions arise: What is it about these events that promotes so much enjoyment, given the seemingly oppressive conditions that exist there? What makes the usual and expected standards of physical well-being and creature comforts unimportant to so many people at the same time?

The feeling of belonging to a group of like-minded people while retaining a sense of individuality is a common sentiment expressed by dancers. Participants agree that they experience a profound peacefulness, yet have the opportunity to appreciate

changes in time and space and the erotically charged atmosphere. In addition, the intensity of the musical experience that results from its duration, rhythm, and high volume, the enthusiastic and ecstatic body sensations of dancing – all this and much more constitute components of what academics call the “fun culture in a post-traditional community.”

It is also clear that the use of drugs within this context cannot be ignored. The analysis of drug use must be approached from two angles. First, one must look at drug use as a general cultural phenomenon; secondly, it has to be seen as a specific phenomenon of the giant party culture of the Techno scene. With regard to the first issue, in all cultures – though specific definitions differ – we can identify socially acceptable or legal drugs as well as illicit ones. In some instances certain kinds of people, as defined by age, gender, profession and/or health status are forbidden from using particular drugs. The social position of drug users and of drug use within the cultural milieu dictate why certain drugs are accepted or rejected.

It may be observed that in all cultures, especially during ceremonial occasions such as celebrations, feasts and parties, people use a variety of drugs. Even in societies like our own, we find few formal or informal social gatherings that do not include the consumption of alcohol and tobacco. In German society, alcohol is an extremely common substance, consumed symbolically in the Eucharist celebration and in mass quantities at the Munich *Oktoberfest* – a raucous celebration of beer. The most modest bourgeois party in Germany invariably includes alcohol.

For many years alcohol use has only played a marginal role in the Techno-scene, despite its general popularity in German society. Its insignificance at raves is understandable, however, given the collective ideology that prevails at these giant parties. Ravers value self-revelation, the enhancement of experience, action, power and stamina, situations which are counter to alcohol's dominant effects. In this study, however, we discovered that the avoidance of alcohol is no longer the norm, as sweet mixed drinks and beer are increasingly being consumed at these events. One factor contributing to this increase in alcohol consumption may be that illegal drugs are often scarce and relatively expensive, even at raves. It may also have to do with the fact that very often only “bad” substances are available, drugs that pose the risk of undesirable side effects.

Despite the recent introduction of alcohol into the rave scene, a Techno party still differs from other music and dance events in that alcohol is not the psychoactive substance of choice. Rather, licit and illicit substances that enhance activity, stamina, interpersonal contact and sensual experience are found at the typical rave. However, this does not mean that all or even the greater part of ravers must be on drugs in order for such an atmosphere to exist. It only means that the social interaction patterns at

raves are not typical, nor do they resemble those of normal social gatherings that feature alcohol consumption.

More concretely, typical rave drug consumption centers around party substances like speed and ecstasy, drugs that are supposed to enhance physical performance, intensify sensory experience, and facilitate increased social contact. This bucolic portrayal resembles the faux images of the effects of nicotine as created by cigarette producers. In the rave setting, enthusiasts use cannabis to relax and chill out. Recently, LSD and “magic mushrooms” have appeared, although the use of cocaine and crack is not typical for the Techno scene. Heroin is widely maligned and even feared by participants.

Party drugs selected for their specific effects differ significantly from other drugs. Of course in practice, all substances produce both desirable and undesirable effects. Desired effects of MDMA-based substances in this setting include states of euphoria, relaxation, intensification of the music, physical sensitivity, the sensation of warmth, the enhancement of stamina, increased capacity for communication and interpersonal contact. Undesirable effects include jaw grinding, muscle cramps, vertigo, heart palpitations, or depressive states. In addition to the health risks involved when consuming substances that have been cut with unknown additives, participants also fear law enforcement control measures.

This form of drug use – like any other – is typically embedded in a subjective context. Consequently, when talking about ecstasy and the Techno culture we must also address other significant characteristics of the scene. One striking feature of Techno events is the peaceful nature of interactions between Techno adherents and their amenity toward people of different backgrounds and orientations. This is not necessarily the same as tolerance. The peacefulness that bridges genders, lifestyles, age-groups, organizers and participants, etc., makes it possible for these masses to assemble under the described rave conditions and celebrate for hours without provoking total chaos. Based on our observations, these loving and – relative to other youthful music cultures – irritatingly peaceful interactions are characteristic of the Techno scene.

In the Techno scene we find a faction of the drug culture that is also influenced by the society as a whole. By and large this group can be explained within the context of the dominant value orientations of the entire German culture. The desire to be part of a limitless quasi-family, to belong to the “unity,” and to “have fun together with others” seem typical for the “common raver.” In contrast, participants also characterize these events as opportunities; to be different, to rid themselves of inhibitions, to be conspicuous, to celebrate their own party within the larger party and to participate in their own personal shows. Apparently the aim is to be like nobody else in order to be like everybody – or to be like everybody in order to be someone special. In brief, the aim is the mutual production of a collective leisure ecstasy.

Some observers and analysts of drug use patterns in societies such as ours interpret the emergence of ecstasy and other party drugs as indications of a comprehensive cultural trend, away from "hard" and consciousness-muting drugs such as heroin and alcohol, and toward substances that can be used recreationally without hindering the user's ability to participate in normal everyday life. We note that these so-called "light drugs" are not seen as addictive substances being used by dropouts, but rather as vehicles for fantasy and pleasure for people searching for weekend fun in a community of like-minded individuals.

In this sense, the Techno scene reflects the characteristics of a post-traditional part-time community. This is not a community which one is born or socialized into, however, but one chosen for aesthetic reasons, for a limited amount of time and at a low cost. Such a community is of course no more than an idea, an imaginary place, although it exists through the belief in its existence and possesses authority because it is ascribed authority. Its power is not based on coercion and obligation but rather on seduction, on the voluntary emotional bonding of the members to a mutual spirit.

According to rave participant Zygmunt, "In the moments of condensation it can literally reach a breath-taking intensity." The altered states of consciousness and pleasurable sensations that ravers experience when having a "fabulous party" often appear to others as something quite different. Participants achieve the "ultimate kick" during the great events that characterize the Techno scene predominantly through amphetamine derivatives – despite the widespread publication of many incredible warnings about unintended side effects.

The foregoing observations suggest that drug use in the Techno scene is not likely to be affected by any attempts at controlling it through drug policy, whether these measures be "harsh" or "soft." The epidemiology of these use patterns will only change if and when the Techno culture becomes outmoded. Individual life changes will normally be accompanied by a retreat from the scene. They can also be initiated when a person locates a more desirable alternative activity. In this sense, Johannes Herwig-Lempp recently argued that we should not treat drug users as passive objects of our paternalistic meddling, but rather as individuals who are capable of responsible decision-making. In doing so, we are likely to avoid a great deal of difficulty, as in many instances doing nothing may be more beneficial than doing something. As Tom Hodgkinson once said, "If you want a healthy society, then nothing must be done. Just let the people get on with it."

## PILL KICK

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The data and relations reported here are based on a standardized survey that was administered on April 30, 2001, to visitors at "Mayday," a giant Techno event. This study was conducted by the Chair of General Sociology, University of Dortmund, under the responsibility of Ivonne Bemerburg and Teresa Heidegger.

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