



## The Case for ‘Everyday Politics’: Evaluating Neo-tribal Theory as a Way to Understand Alternative Forms of Political Participation, Using Electronic Dance Music Culture as an Example

- **Sarah C.E. Riley**  
*University of Bath*
- **Christine Griffin**  
*University of Bath*
- **Yvette Morey**  
*University of Bath*

### ABSTRACT

This article argues that youth cultural leisure and consumption practices have the potential to be sites for alternative political participation, an ‘everyday politics’ that involves a personalizing of politics and an ‘aloof’ stance regarding official institutions. Drawing on the work of Harris (2001) and Maffesoli (1996), the article outlines the lenses that make up ‘everyday politics’, namely ‘sociality and proxemics’, ‘solidarity and belonging’, ‘hedonism’, ‘vitality and puissance’, and ‘sovereignty over one’s own existence’; empirically examining these lenses using qualitative data from a project on participating in electronic dance culture (clubbing, raving, partying). The article suggests that everyday politics is a useful concept in understanding alternative forms of political activism and calls for broader definitions of political participation, including those that do not have a social change agenda. The need for future work in theorizing and empirically examining how everyday and traditional political activities interact is highlighted.

### KEY WORDS

clubbing / dance culture / everyday politics / neo-tribal theory / political participation / rave / youth culture

## Introduction

*There are many fine thinkers who label this as compromise, degeneracy or hypocrisy. As always, the normative judgement holds little interest; it does not let us seize the vitality at work within the avoidance lifestyles ... There are times when what matters is less a question of the individual than the community of which he or she is a member, or when the great history of events is less important than histories experienced every day; the imperceptible situations which constitute our community network.*  
(Maffesoli, 1996: 92, 123)

A variety of youth cultural practices have been interpreted as apolitical because they do not have a social change agenda. Electronic dance music culture (also known as raving, clubbing, partying) is such an example, with analysts dismissing its political potential by constructing it as ‘merely’ entertainment, escapism or associated with personal development (e.g. Reynolds, 1997; Wilson, 2006). However, Maffesoli’s (1996) neo-tribal theory offers an alternative way of theorizing political participation as an ‘everyday politics’ that is conceptualized through the lenses of sociality, hedonism and sovereignty over one’s own existence. In this article we examine the notion of ‘everyday politics’ and Maffesoli’s neo-tribal theory in relation to a qualitative study on participating in electronic dance music culture (EDMC). In doing so, we address debates within youth cultural work regarding the political potential of EDMC, arguing that the more detailed elaboration of Maffesoli’s neo-tribal theory that we present in this article can move these debates forward.

Political engagement has traditionally been thought of as a set of rights and duties that involve formally organized civic and political activities (e.g. voting or joining a political party). Concern has been raised over the relative decline in such activities amongst young people. However, some analysts have argued that this has been matched by a rise in new, alternative forms of political and social participation, which are unofficial and located at the individual or informal group level (Gill, 2007; Harris, 2001). Examples of such forms of political participation include participating in leisure activities such as being a member of the grlzine/gURL scene movement (Harris, 2001). Harris, for example, argued that such young women used internet magazines to create their own space from which to negotiate, redefine and reclaim politics, citizenship and novel gender subjectivities. Harris’s work suggests that leisure-based activities can provide sites for young people to engage in practices that relate to participation and citizenship and are thus ‘forms of politics, often misrecognised as entertainment’ (Harris et al., 2001: 12). From this standpoint, leisure and consumption may be sites for new forms of alternative political participation, distinguished by the term ‘everyday politics’.

Personal lives and youth/musical subcultures have previously been the basis for alternative forms of political activism: for example, the ‘identity politics’ of feminism; gay/lesbian liberation and black power; and aspects of musical movements such as soul, punk, reggae and hip hop. These examples share a focus on consciousness raising, interpreting personal lives as political and developing

agendas for social change (Sharma et al., 1996). What distinguishes everyday politics from these previous moves to expand the concept of politics is the desire of the latter to initiate social change and in doing so to engage at some level with institutions of power, even if to demonstrate against it. However, as Harris argues, when young people engage with state institutions to effect social change, their actions problematically work to both endorse these systems and to locate themselves in a subordinate position within them:

... young people may well have their own ideas about how states and citizenry should operate, and to ask to be included or to participate in the current order is to endorse a system that may be fundamentally at odds with these other visions. Further, it is to accept one's subordinate position as a fringe dweller who can only ever hope to be invited or asked to participate, but who can never do the inviting themselves. (2001: 187)

One solution, as with the gURLzine movement, is therefore not to engage with institutions associated with governance and power, but to create one's own spaces in which to live out alternative values, shifting political participation to the 'everyday' individual or informal group level. We argue that this shift makes particular sense within the current context of neo-liberalism and decreases in the efficacy of democratic representation.

Since the 1980s, UK Government policy has encouraged its citizens to understand themselves through neo-liberal rhetoric in which the individual is conceptualized as a risk-managing, self-monitoring subject, responsible for his/her own destiny and no longer determined by social structures such as class, race and sex (Giddens, 1991; Kelly, 2006; O'Malley and Valverde, 2004). Leisure and consumption practices become significant tools in the management of the neo-liberal self (Giddens, 1991) and the social context in which a person lives is reduced to immediate interpersonal relations. Problems are therefore located at the individual level and discourses of collective experience and struggle are absent (McRobbie, 2009). Neo-liberalism thus creates a context in which it makes sense to engage in political participation through consumption practices at the individual or informal group level (Gill, 2007; Harris, 2001).

In parallel with the rise in neo-liberalism has been a decrease in the sense of the efficacy of representative democracy. Factors that have produced this change include a fundamental shift in the modernist social-democratic politics of representation and consensus towards conviction politics (Steinberg and Johnson, 2005). Alienation from traditional politics is now part of the contemporary British political landscape (Colman and Götze, 2001; Griffin, 2005).<sup>1</sup> In this context, it makes sense for young people to practice 'aloofness' towards official government organization, turning away from a politics with which they are alienated in favour of engagement in 'everyday politics': participation at the local and informal level where one can gain a sense of sovereignty over one's own existence.

However, claims for 'everyday politics' are controversial and both theoretical analysis and empirical evidence are highly underdeveloped. One theorist who contributed significantly to these debates is the sociologist Michel Maffesoli, to whose work we now turn.

## Neo-tribalism

Maffesoli (e.g. 1996) proposes that contemporary western social organization has developed into a 'neo-tribal' structure in which people move between small and potentially temporary groups distinguished by shared lifestyles, values and understandings of what is appropriate behaviour. Like all tribes, these groups have an aesthetic ethic, a collective bond that involves shared values and understandings of what is appropriate behaviour. What makes this social formation 'neo' tribal, rather than traditionally tribal, is that neo-tribal memberships are plural, temporary and fluid (since people shift between varieties of neo-tribes during the course of their daily lives). In addition, neo-tribes are often elective and based around consumption practices.

The key way that neo-tribes may be regarded as political is that in having their own aesthetic ethic they have the potential to create moments in which to live out their own values, creating temporary pockets of sovereignty over their own existence. In so doing, they may 'make it possible to escape or at least relativize the institutions of power' (Maffesoli, 1996: 44).<sup>2</sup> For Maffesoli, traditional politics are based on modernist institutions (such as national and regional government structures) that are formed on principles of rationality. He argues that human organization is shifting away from these large institutions, but not through direct challenge. Instead, people employ a kind of power through being aloof, taking an avoidance stance by turning their back on modernist institutions and focusing instead on local, 'proxemic' groups, with which they have an emotional (rather than rational) affiliation. These groups 'keep us warm and provide social spaces in the heart of the cold, inhuman metropolis' (Maffesoli, 1996: 42). In these groups, cultural rituals are enacted that are characterized by, amongst other things, 'sociality and proxemics', 'solidarity and belonging', 'hedonism', 'vitality and puissance', and 'sovereignty over one's own existence'. We argue that it is in these concepts that an understanding of 'everyday politics' may be elaborated.

Sociality and proxemics refer to the idea that in sharing a space or an activity we gain a sense of being together and an emotional attachment to the group. The 'glue' that brings people together is proxemics (being local, or near to each other in either a physical or virtual way) and the experience and pleasure of sociality that we gain from being with each other produces a sense of solidarity and belonging.

Maffesoli (1996) argues that neo-tribalism is based on a family-clan-sect structure of mainly elective groups. These clans provide a sense of solidarity and belonging since they represent 'a keeping warm together' (p. 83) through a 're-actualization of the ancient myth of community' (p. 148) in which pleasure is taken in being together for the sake of being together (thus solidarity and belonging are closely linked with sociality and proxemics). The aim is therefore not to change the world, but to survive in it – a politics of survival rather than resistance, through the creation of sites in which to experience communal hedonism and pleasure.

Neo-tribes let us experience belonging, pleasure in being sociable and a sense of vitality. These experiences are enabled through a living for the moment perspective, a Dionysian hedonism of taking 'pleasure in the good things in life' (Maffesoli, 1996: 53). This hedonistic vitality is linked to Maffesoli's notion of *puissance*, the will or power to be agentic, and in this way hedonism, vitality and *puissance* are linked.

A central aspect of neo-tribal *puissance* is sovereignty over one's own existence. Neo-tribes create temporary spaces in which to participate in a set of shared practices, creating a common bond. In focusing on creating their own spaces neo-tribes are constituted as independent of official (modernist, institutional) governance. In this way members can have sovereignty over their own existence, if only at a temporary or local level: 'even if one feels alienated from the distant economic-political order, one can assert sovereignty over one's near existence' (Maffesoli, 1996: 44).

What makes neo-tribal social formations political is the emphasis on having sovereignty over one's own existence, which can be understood as the power, or *puissance*, to create social spaces defined by one's own aesthetic ethic. Everyday politics is thus understood in terms of its emphasis on creating (temporary pockets) of sovereignty; an 'aloof' stance towards official institutions of power; and a focus on social, hedonistic gatherings that celebrate vitality and belongingness. Everyday politics are thus distinct from both traditional and alternative forms of 'identity' politics, which in one way or another engage with official institutions of power in order to effect social change or critique the status quo. However, what is absent from the literature is a detailed empirical analysis of everyday politics as outlined above, an absence we now address, using participation in EDMC as an example.

## Electronic Dance Music Culture

EDMC is an umbrella term used to describe a heterogeneous international youth cultural phenomenon. EDMC has a 20-year history and has been analysed in contradictory ways. For some, EDMC is a site for the celebration of pleasure that creates alternative forms of subjectivity and inclusive social interactions (e.g. McRobbie, 1994; Malbon, 1999; Pini, 2001; Wilson, 2006). However, others have noted the reproduction of traditional social stratifications in relation to taste, class and gender (e.g. Thornton, 1995).

The early UK rave scene has been contradictorily analysed as evidence of celebration, active resistance and an apolitical stance towards the increasingly individualistic and materialistic culture of Britain in the 1980s (Collin, 1997; Garratt, 1998; Reynolds, 1997). The large-scale events that developed from smaller parties were, for example, considered to embody the entrepreneurial spirit encouraged by Thatcherism. However, the discourses of unity and sociality associated with these raves were interpreted as attempts to resist the dominant individualistic discourses of the time. Alternatively, rave was considered apolitical

because its focus on hedonist weekend escapes from the 'real' world meant it lacked a social change agenda, 'rave culture has never really been about altering reality, merely exempting yourself from it for a while' (Reynolds, 1997: 109).

Constructing the escapism aspect of rave as anti-political is at one level shared by Maffesoli. Maffesoli describes the 'festive dimension' (1996: 51) of resistance as tragic because it involves expending the energy of the participants in the process of the party. Neo-tribalism therefore produces temporary pockets of freedom, not permanent utopias, making the aim 'less at changing the world than getting used to and tinkering with it' (1996: 51). However, Maffesoli sees the temporary and fluid nature of neo-tribal formations as their political strength, even if it does carry a tragic dimension.

The plural and temporary nature of neo-tribes means that there are too many groups, all in constant flux, for official institutions to identify, name and overtly govern. Neo-tribes thus avoid what Maffesoli calls 'domestication' through plurality and localism: 'it could be the various networks, affinity and interest groups or neighbourhood ties that structure our megalopolises. Whatever the case, *puissance* is set against power, even if *puissance* can only advance in disguise, to avoid being crushed by power' (1996: 47).

'Everyday politics' is thus a politics of survival and hedonism/pleasure, in which pockets of (temporary) autonomy that are potentially counter-hegemonic may flourish. Given that contemporary youth cultures exist within the wider political context outlined earlier (i.e. neo-liberalism and alienation from traditional political structures), survival through aloofness and play, rather than direct challenge, become forms of effective political action (Maffesoli, 1996).

(R)ather than 'fighting alienation with alienated methods' (bureaucracy, party politics, militancy, deferment of pleasure), one uses derision, irony, laughter – all underground strategies which undermine the process of normalization and domestication which are the goals of the guarantors of the external and hence abstract order. (Maffesoli, 1996: 50)

Despite Maffesoli's emphasis on understanding political participation in terms of sovereignty, aloofness to official institutions and a celebration of hedonistic social gatherings, youth cultural analysts continue to problematize the political potential of EDMC because of its 'lack' of an ideology of social change. Reasons for the continuation of these debates include a lack of empirical work and the limited elaboration of neo-tribal theory in relation to how it might be used to theorize alternative forms of political participation.

Notable exceptions to the lack of empirical studies regarding political participation in EDMC are Brian Wilson's (2006) interview and participant observation research with self-identified ravers in mid 1990s' Canada and Greener and Hollands' (2006) online survey with participants of psytrance (a particular subgenre of EDMC) internet discussion groups.

Wilson (2006) drew on the Maffesoli-influenced work of Malbon (e.g. 1999) and Bennett (e.g. 1999) and from Bey's (e.g. 1991) concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) to first make a case for EDMC as political. Wilson

argued that raves can be interpreted as examples of TAZs since they are periodic, self-governing, hedonistic, 'parties or gatherings that explicitly challenge mainstream value systems associated with consumption and social order by virtue of their status as unsanctioned get-togethers in illegal venues' (Wilson, 2006: 158). However, Wilson also drew on classic hegemonic theory and concluded that rave is not political because it does not have a social change ideology. We argue that neo-tribal theory opens up the potential for an alternative conclusion to that made by Wilson. What may have prevented Wilson from considering rave as a form of everyday politics is the relatively limited elaboration of neo-tribal theory presented by previous researchers who have championed the theory.

Researchers such as Bennett (e.g. 1999) and Malbon (e.g. 1999) have engaged with neo-tribal theory in relation to questions around issues of identity and to previous debates set up by subcultural theory. In responding to the dominance of subcultural theory that locates subcultural practices as part of fixed, class-bound identities, advocates of neo-tribal theory have tended to emphasize the temporary, potentially arbitrary and consumer-based characteristics of neo-tribal identities (e.g. Bennett, 1999). In doing so they have paid less attention to other aspects of neo-tribal theory, namely issues around aloofness to traditional political structures and a focus on the practices of sociality and hedonism in creating moments of sovereignty over one's own existence.

Greener and Hollands (2006) also address previous debates concerning neo-tribal and subcultural theory. Although they tie their analysis of the political potential of psytrance to a social change agenda, they identify discourses used by their participants that construct politics in ways that match with an 'everyday politics' understanding of sovereignty and aloofness. However, Greener and Hollands do not associate these discourses of sovereignty with neo-tribe theory.<sup>3</sup> For example, Greener and Hollands argue:

In contrast to earlier counter-cultural movements, for whom political protest was seen as intrinsic to the invocation of social change ... the communal utopian ideologies of the virtual psytrance community point to the idea that simply living a psytrance lifestyle is a powerful tool for social change and transformation of human consciousness ... Although the meanings given to psytrance music do not directly lead to political protest or activity that challenges society directly ... they do offer some form of challenge to modern hegemonies by offering psytrancers a means of escape or 'transcendence' from regular society. (2006: 403, and 405)

In this article we engage with debates on the potential for leisure-based activities in general, and EDMC practices in particular, to be understood as enabling alternative forms of political participation. We argue that neo-tribal theory has the potential to provide a framework for understanding the kinds of practices identified by Greener and Hollands (2006) and Wilson (2006) as political, but that the employment of neo-tribal theory has so far been limited by both a lack of detailed elaboration of the lenses that make up the political aspects of neo-tribal theory – what might be called 'everyday politics' – and empirical work that has examined these lenses. In this article we have so far elaborated on the lenses

of everyday politics ('sociality and proxemics', 'solidarity and belonging', 'hedonism', 'vitality and puissance', and 'sovereignty over one's own existence') and in the following section we examine evidence for these from data collected in a study on participating in EDMC, entitled 'Reverberating Rhythms'.

## Reverberating Rhythms

Reverberating Rhythms was a two-year study that aimed to examine the social and political identities enabled through participating in EDMC.<sup>4</sup> The study employed interview, focus group and participant observation methods with participants from two sub-scenes (an urban 'drum and bass' scene and a rural free party scene). The case studies were chosen because they represent some of the heterogeneity of EDMC, with their differences orienting around issues of music style, history, urban/rural, levels of commerciality and legality.

To briefly describe the difference: drum and bass is characterized by fast tempo broken beat drums (generally between 160 and 180 beats per minute) with heavy and often intricate bass-lines. Drum and bass has been positioned as urban, industrial, working-class and black-oriented music (Collin, 1997). Nevertheless, some aspects of drum and bass have been incorporated into wider popular culture, for example, it is regularly heard in the evenings on the national BBC music station Radio 1, and in our participant observations the vast majority of the clientele at the city centre clubs we went to were white. In contrast, free parties are illegal raves held in fairly isolated rural areas (for example, disused quarries, Forestry Commission or farm land) or in unlicensed urban settings, such as warehouses. Typically, one or more sound systems will be set up over a weekend, often playing techno or acid-techno; these forms of electronic music use a regular 4/4 beat usually in the range of 140–160 beats/minute. Acid-techno originated from the London squat party scene and has had little commercial impact. Both drum and bass and techno are among many genres (and indeed have their own sub-genres) of electronic dance music that, while drawing on earlier and other musical influences, originated from the 'Acid House' music scene in the late 1980s.

Data were collected in two phases. In phase one, 10 participant observations were conducted. The venues for participant observations were chosen because they represented a range of the events or nights available in the locality. For example, weekend and midweek, large and small, regular and one-off drum and bass club nights held in a south-western English city were attended. Free party events included single and multiple 'rig' (sound system) parties in both England and Wales, on normal and Bank holiday weekends. With both case studies the researchers got permission from relevant gatekeepers (e.g. club promoters, sound system organizers) and introduced themselves to participants as researchers. The participant observations were therefore as overt as possible given that the context of a large gathering of people in a public space meant that



not all people there could be informed. Care was also taken not to intrude or otherwise interrupt participants' partying (fieldnotes, for example, were not taken during the event but recorded immediately afterwards).<sup>5</sup> Thirty-one interview participants were recruited either at the events we attended or through snowballing techniques. Interviews were held at a time and place convenient to the participants outside of party time. Questions focused on what the participants did and enjoyed when clubbing or partying; the relationships their clubbing/partying had with other aspects of their lives; if there were any values associated with clubbing or partying; and if they considered what they did to be political. In phase two the analysis of the phase one data was summarized and brought back to the participants for discussion in eight interviews and two focus groups. The focus groups, interviews and observations were split equally between the two case studies.

In our participant observations, participants at free parties were overwhelmingly white, claimed working or middle-class identities, but did not tend to work in the professions. Although the drum and bass nights had a wider demographic in terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants were white and often students (with the exception of a large event that, based on our reading of the range of styles appropriated by the participants, had an apparently wider demographic). In both case studies, the majority of participants were male (approximately 60–75%).

The demographics of the interview and focus group participants reflected a similar pattern to our participant observations. Twenty-two males and nine females participated, with an age range of 20–41 years: 22 identified as white British, three as mixed ethnicity, two as white other, one as black African, one as black Caribbean (two missing data). In terms of employment, 15 were employed, six unemployed, seven categorized themselves as 'other' (two of whom described themselves as 'self-employed') and one was studying in college (two missing data). Nine participants were educated to degree level. Participants with a range of engagement in EDMC were recruited, including musicians, DJs, promoters, party organizers, frequent and less frequent clubbers/partiers.

None of the participants received any form of payment, and pseudonyms chosen by the participants were used in all reports. Interviews and focus group data were transcribed.<sup>6</sup> Building on previous work by the authors (e.g. Riley, 2002, 2003; Riley and Cahill, 2005), the analysis involved several cycles of coding, moving from descriptive, in-vivo codes to more conceptual codes. Codes were given titles and descriptions and attention was paid to make the codes exhaustive and exclusive. When we were able to articulate most of our data within these codes, we then compared our codes to the lenses that constitute everyday politics; namely, 'sociality and proxemics', 'solidarity and belonging', 'hedonism, vitality and puissance', and 'sovereignty over one's own existence'. In so doing we were able to examine whether these concepts were evident in our data, and, if they were, how they were articulated within the context of participating in EDMC.

In both case studies a large amount of data was identified that articulated the concepts of everyday politics. Examples of these are discussed below. Given

the similarity of participants' talk on political participation that occurred across the case studies we present their data together. However, we note that there were differences between the two groups, most notably in terms of a greater normalization of ketamine use amongst our free party participants (for more details on this subject see Riley et al., 2008).

## An Empirical Analysis of Everyday Politics

### Sociality and Proxemics

Sociality and proxemics are terms that describe the sharing of a space or activity that leads to a celebration of being together. Our participants represented this experience in a variety of ways. For example, in Extract 3 below, Magnus talked about fleeting moments of community created even in the mundane practice of queuing, while Jenni described the importance of going to places where she can see her friends, a sentiment echoed by Noy-Z who emphasized the importance of sociality in terms of going to parties to interact with friends and meet new people. Thus, proxemics is constituted as enabling sociality, which in turn is represented as an important part of the party experience. Indeed, participants talked about socializing as a key value, as Noy-Z said, it is 'the main reason'.

When I'm out clubbing it's all about seeing my friends (.) 'cos that's where, you know, that's where they'll all be sort of thing (.) um (.) maybe I'll like you know sort of go dance for a bit (.) but generally I'm just chatting to people in different places. (Extract 1: Jenni, Drum and bass)

The main reason [for going to parties] really I think (.) well apart from the music (.) is (..) going to meet friends (.) see people (.) meet new people (.) catch up etc. (.) that type of (.) thing. (Noy-Z, Free Party)

In Extract 1, Jenni makes sociality salient through phrases that use both all encompassing and generalized terms ('it's *all* about seeing my friends', '*generally* I'm just chatting to people'), while in Extract 2 Noy-Z describes 'the main reason' for partying as being to socialize ('meet friends (.) see people (.) meet new people'). Although both participants mention other activities such as dancing or listening to music, sociality is constructed as the central rationale behind clubbing or partying and is intimately linked to proxemics since the club/party provides the location for this socializing, as Jenni says 'that's where they'll all be'.

When you go out clubbing or when you're going to a party or just standing in a queue or just in a load of cars or something there is that kind of sense of community, even if it's just for a moment. I feel it kind of builds up and there's always a certain point where it kind of comes up and then it drops off again ... sometimes you're lucky and it kind of stays there for a while ... sometimes you've got to hunt around to find it again. (Extract 3: Magnus, Drum and bass)

In Extract 3, Magnus lists three aspects of going clubbing/partying that each in turn get weaker in terms of community, since there is a shift from 'party' to

'queue' to 'just in a load of cars or something', with the word 'just' operating to minimize the potential significance of these activities. However, even in this context he describes experiencing a pleasurable sociality – a 'sense of community ... [which] if you're lucky ... stays there for a while'. This sense of sociality is created through proxemics, since the experience can be initiated just by virtue of sharing a location such as a nightclub queue.

### Solidarity and Belonging

Maffesoli (1996) argues that belonging to a community, however temporary, brings a sense of warmth through the experience of solidarity and belonging. Our participants described such experiences; for example, in Extract 4 Lulu states that 'there's pleasure in being part of a group ... it's like a sense of warmth', while Michael (Extract 5) evokes a sense of solidarity when describing his 'sense of belonging' within a community that accepts you for who you are.

It's nice to have a sense of belonging isn't it? There's pleasure in being part of a group. There's no cliqueness, everyone's welcome and anything's welcome, so then, you know, it's really nice because it's like a sense of warmth. (Extract 4: Lulu, Free Party)

It is that community that sense of belonging (.) um the sense that you've got friends that you can go completely let your hair down you've got (.) you've got no (.) you've got nothing to live up to you know you can be (.) whoever you want to be you can be a 100% yourself and nobody judges you for it whereas in everyday life you do you know if you're a little bit different from somebody else you're you're odd you know go away [clears throat] but you don't get that you don't get that in the scene. (Extract 5: Michael, Free Party)

In Extract 5, Michael supports Lulu's association of free partying/EDMC with a sense of community and belonging, developing this theme to include a sense of sovereignty ('be whoever you want to be'). Both associate this belonging specifically with the non-judgemental nature of EDMC, which in Extract 5 is contrasted with 'everyday life'. Participants are therefore constructed as having multiple selves (participating in both everyday and party lives) in which the party world acts as a neo-tribe with its own set of values such as openness. This openness is constructed in relation to people and, perhaps in Lulu's extract ('everyone's welcome and anything's welcome'), also includes a veiled reference to drugs given the prevalence of illegal drugs in EDMC (Riley et al., 2008).

### Hedonism, Vitality and Puisseance

The concepts of hedonism, vitality and puissance encapsulate the idea of a hedonistic celebration of life and the agency so to do. Our participants described enjoying pleasure for pleasure's sake as a central value in their lives and one that, at times, became their main priority, encapsulated in Rebecca's Star Trek reference that describes fun as the 'prime directive'.<sup>7</sup>

It's all about having fun and it's like a prime directive, particularly in this city, it's like having fun is pretty much number one on everybody's agenda. (Extract 6: Rebecca, Drum and bass)

I moved to B-city and it was just – every weekend I was just out on it and then I started going to all the mid-weeks as well and then it just got to the point where I was going out every night of the week [laughs] and just getting into it and then, yeah I had to calm down a bit (.) I lost a lot of jobs in that time [laughs] spent a lot of money and lost a lot of jobs, but it was a good time. I wouldn't change any of it. It was good. (Extract 7: Monego, Drum and bass)

In Extract 7, Monego tells a story of escalating partying from every weekend to some 'mid-weeks' to eventually every night, an escalation that is considered unsustainable ('I had to calm down'), particularly in relation to Monego's ability to participate in other aspects of life, most notably as an economic citizen. The story concludes, however, with the centrality of pleasure, hedonism and vitality associated with clubbing – 'I wouldn't change any of it. It was good'. This celebration of sociality and hedonism for its own sake is also described by Steve (Extract 8), who, having moved away from viewing partying as an overtly political activity, describes his current interpretation of partying as a celebration of being alive and being together.

It's more of like a celebration thing (.) it's more of a kind've hey we're alive we're together we're having a party (.) there's nothing deep in this (.) this is a good time. (Extract 8: Steve, Free Party)

### Sovereignty

Central to our participants' experiences of clubbing and partying was the ability to exercise sovereignty over one's own existence, that is, to be able to live out (if temporarily) one's ethics of aesthetics.

I feel like clubbing allows a certain amount of freedom and allows everybody around me and my friends a certain amount of freedom. We can break out of the mould of the nine to five or whatever. Even for those people who are working nine to five can break away from reality a little bit and go to the zone – the club zone. (Extract 9: Rebecca, Drum and bass)

Rebecca's talk of the 'club zone' evokes a place where clubbers are able to experience elements of sovereignty ('a certain amount of freedom') and a temporary escape from the everyday world ('break away from reality a little bit'), which is also described in terms that evoke the economic citizen ('break out of the mould of the nine to five'). The club zone thus acts as a temporary autonomous zone (TAZ), a place that challenges mainstream and commercial values (it is free of the 'nine to five'), despite clubnights being held in commercial venues that sell branded alcohol. In our data both drum and bass clubbers, like Rebecca, who went to commercial venues (however 'underground' or subcultural they may be construed) and our free party participants (e.g. Lulu and Michael) who attended non-commercial events shared a discourse that constructed their

partying/clubbing as a practice of sovereignty outside of 'everyday life'. Some participants also explicitly linked sovereignty (in terms of 'liv(ing) by our own rules' and 'the way people want to live their lives and how they live their lives') with politics as in Extracts 10 and 11 below.

I think our politics are more of the idea that um: we can live by our own rules. (Extract 10: Alice, Free Party)

It's easy to think of politics as just (.) Tony Blair and people voting and all that, but I think really politics is more about the way people want to live their lives and how they live their lives. I reckon that probably about two or three per cent of people in the rave scene actually vote or pay a blind bit of attention to the actual English political system. I think with our generation there's very much of a 'well that doesn't really make any difference let's not bother with political parties and stick to parties' [laughs]. (Extract 11: Trevor, Free Party)

In Extract 11, Trevor articulates a wider alienation from democratic representation ('with our generation there's very much of a "well that doesn't really make any difference let's not bother with political parties"'), an alienation also described by Alice elsewhere in her interview ('I feel that (.) most people that I talk to are very disheartened (.) have no faith whatsoever in our political system or the way our world's run'). This alienation creates the rationale for a practice of aloofness – of turning away from official institutional governance to the informal and personal realm by creating temporary pockets of individual sovereignty characterized by sociality and hedonism ('stick to parties').

The party as a TAZ or neo-tribe practice is always temporary (even if they last several days). In previous subcultures, such as hippy or traveller cultures, meaningfulness was bestowed on those who most closely approximated permanent alternative lifestyles (McKay, 1998). In contrast, our participants did not seek to live only in the party world, but in line with neo-tribal social organization, they participated in temporary, fluid and multiple groups, with many moving in and out of the 'nine to five' world. For example, although participants talked about bringing back 'rave' values into their everyday lives, nearly all of them were keen to describe themselves as having multiple identities, as Genie, a free party participant, stated 'I am a party person [laughs] but yeah there is a lot else to me'.

## Conclusion

In this article we have outlined some of the key concepts in Maffesoli's neo-tribal theory, namely 'sociality and proxemics', 'solidarity and belonging', 'hedonism, vitality and puissance', and 'sovereignty over one's own existence' and shown the particular ways in which these concepts were articulated and drawn upon by participants of EDMC. We argue that these concepts make up a set of practices associated with an alternative form of political participation, which we have called 'everyday politics'.

Everyday politics can be understood as a cluster of values that orient around the pleasure of being together (including notions of hedonism, belonging, solidarity, sociality), in temporary social groups that form through proxemics at the local level. These groups create temporary pockets of sovereignty over one's own existence, characterized by particular set of values and behaviours. The focus on sovereignty creates an aloof stance towards official organizational institutions of power, since neo-tribes prioritize the politics of survival over those of social change. Our elaboration of the concepts that make up the notion of everyday politics and demonstration of them in an empirical study addressed paucity in previous research on the political potential of EDMC, which has been scattered, limited and has tended to focus on the elective nature of neo-tribes and differentiating neo-tribe theory from subcultural theory (e.g. Bennett, 1999).

Participating in EDMC enabled our participants to create temporary moments in which to live out alternative value systems to those, which for them, represented the dominant culture. This living-out of alternative value systems enabled participants to create (temporary pockets of) sovereignty over their own existence. From a neo-tribal perspective, this is a form of politics, but one that is aloof from institutions of governance because it does not need to engage with them to forward an agenda for social change, since its agenda is pleasure and survival. We can consider this an 'active aloofness', a turning away from traditional forms of governance, not because of a deficit on the participants' behalf but because a series of factors, including neo-liberalism and its discourses around the rights and responsibilities to manage oneself and a reduction in the efficacy of democratic representation, have come together to create the conditions of possibility for the practices of everyday politics to make sense.

Our analysis suggests that everyday politics is a useful concept in understanding new forms of political action that may be located in youth cultural leisure practices, such as EDMC. The lenses of everyday politics allow for an understanding of practices that enable sovereignty over one's own existence and a celebration of counter-hegemonic values as political, without these practices needing to be permanent or associated with ideologies of social change. This perspective allows us a way of valuing the activities of young people in their own terms even if they do not engage with official political institutions, since a move away from traditional politics can be viewed as evidence of the vitality, not apathy, of those concerned (Maffesoli, 1996). It is not necessary for the participants themselves to construct their participation as political (although some do), since for them participating in EDMC is already meaningful. Our concern has been that such young people have been constructed as politically lacking in some way because they do not engage with official political institutions; everyday politics is valuable therefore because it allows other practices that they engage in to be understood as politically meaningful.

Our thesis is not that everyday politics is the only way to theorize alternative forms of contemporary political participation, nor are we assessing its wider political significance or impact. Rather, we argue for a need to consider

everyday politics as part of a range of practices and understandings that can be analysed as political responses. Indeed, a few of our participants associated their dance culture practices with more traditional definitions of alternative politics, including anarchy and 'do it yourself', understandings that have been available to, although not necessarily appropriated, by participants of EDMC since the emergence of rave (McKay, 1998). Now, as then, these ideological standpoints are not essential for participation, but are available for those who choose to draw on them [see Note 1]. To exclude everyday politics as an important dimension of EDMC is to dismiss as apolitical much of what Maffesoli (1996) argues makes everyday politics powerful.

However, in calling for a plurality in understandings of political action we both highlight a criticism of Maffesoli's work and expose a significant problem for those engaging in everyday politics, namely, that people are not always able to be aloof from the systems that govern them. Maffesoli's construction of a shift from modernist, rational institutions to emotional proxemics has been criticized as failing to theorize the contradictory nature of contemporary social organization, in which both models exist (if with some tension) (Evans, 1997). Traditional and everyday political systems will, at times, interact with each other. An example of where these systems may have a symbiotic relationship is the transferable nature of skills used in producing parties (for example, organizational and financial management), which may then be employed in more traditional forms of political activism (and during the course of this study we have met examples of people who have followed this pathway).

In general, however, the political power of neo-tribes is in terms of their ability to be aloof from governing bodies so that groups cannot be identified and then regulated 'one participates and then withdraws' (Maffesoli, 1996: 49). What is currently undertheorized is what happens when such collectivities of people become the focus of government policy, when the authorities do regulate and legislate against them (see for example, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (UK) and RAVE/PROTECT Act (2003, USA), which targeted aspects of EDMC).

In this article, we therefore highlight the need for future work in theorizing and empirically examining how everyday and traditional political activities interact. Indeed, this should be a central concern for social scientists interested in new forms of political participation and what actions are enabled or disabled by aloof forms of political participation that are focused on survival and sovereignty.

## Acknowledgement

This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, ref. RES-000-22-1171.

## Notes

- 1 We are not arguing that engagement in, and with, official governance does not occur. Some young people participate within organizations (e.g. voting), others engage in external acts of resistance to them (e.g. demonstrating). However, many young people do not engage with official institutions of governance nor draw on discourses of collective and official political participation (Colman and Gøtze, 2001; Griffin, 2005; McRobbie, 2009).
- 2 Maffesoli's (1996) analysis of contemporary western societies enables neo-tribal social organization to be understood as political in a second way: as people move between the groups to which they are affiliated their understanding of what is right and acceptable behaviour becomes relative, since it shifts for each group. Maffesoli's argument is that this relativist perspective facilitates tolerance, since it normalizes diversity. However, the present authors know of no empirical work that has examined this thesis.
- 3 Nor do they feel able to construct psytrance as an example of a neo-tribe because many of their participants had strong and long-term commitments to their psytrance identities. Again, we considered this problem to be an outcome of the way that neo-tribe theory has been discussed in youth cultural research, rather than a problem with neo-tribe theory per se. Our reading of Maffesoli (1996) is that neo-tribes have flexible boundaries, so that members of neo-tribes can have different levels of commitment or identification. One may develop an ideology when participating in a neo-tribe, but because membership originates from an emotion and proxemics, rather than a rationality or ideology, it is not essential to develop a coherent identity or ideology to feel that one can meaningfully participate. Neo-tribal formations therefore do not need coherent ideologies, nor do members join because they have fully formed coherent identities related to that group. However, this does not exclude some members from developing strong levels of commitment or relatively coherent ideological beliefs in regard to this membership.
- 4 This project was funded by an ESRC award (ref. RES-000-22-1171), entitled 'Reverberating Rhythms: Social Identity and Political Participation in Clubland' and ran from November 2005 to October 2007.
- 5 Permission to conduct the study was granted by the University of Bath ethics committee and met British Psychology Society guidelines (BPS, 2006).
- 6 Transcription conventions:  
 (.) A short pause (less than 0.5 seconds approximately)  
 (..) a longer pause between 0.5 – 1–2 seconds)  
 Colons mark the elongation of the prior sound (e.g. rea::lly)  
Underlining shows speaker emphasis
- 7 The 'prime directive' is the guiding principle of *Star Trek's* Starfleet.

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### **Sarah C.E. Riley**

Is a Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Bath, UK. Her research is concerned with identity from a social constructionist approach. She has also written on research methods, with a focus on visual methods and reflexivity. Current projects include a study on leisure, identity and political participation using electronic dance music culture as an example and a co-operative inquiry project on 'dilemmas of femininity'. She is a co-editor of *Critical Bodies: Representations, Identities and Practices of Weight and Body Management* (Palgrave, 2008).

Address: Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK.

E-mail: s.riley@bath.ac.uk

### **Christine Griffin**

Is Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Bath. Much of her recent work explores the relationship between identities and consumption for young people, with a long-standing interest in representations of youth, femininity and young women's lives. Current projects include a study of young people's negotiation of branded leisure spaces at music festivals and free parties, with Andrew Bengry-Howell; a project on clubbing and dance cultures as forms of social and political participation, with Sarah Riley; and a major study on the role of branding and marketing of drinks in relation to young adults' everyday drinking practices. She has published widely in journals including *Feminism and Psychology*, *Discourse Studies*, the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, and the *Journal of Youth Studies*. Monographs include *Standpoints and Differences: Essays in Practice of Feminist Psychology* (with Karen Henwood and Ann Phoenix, Sage, 1998); and *Representations of Youth* (Polity, 1993).

Address: Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK.

E-mail: c.griffin@bath.ac.uk

## **Yvette Morey**

Is a researcher in the Psychology Department at the University of Bath, where she is currently working on a project investigating young people's negotiation of branding and consumption at music festivals and free parties.

Address: Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK.

E-mail: [y.morey@bath.ac.uk](mailto:y.morey@bath.ac.uk)