

# Deviant Leisure: Emerging perspectives on leisure, consumerism and crime

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The Deviant Leisure perspective emerged from the National Deviancy Conference held at Teesside University in summer 2014. Organised by the Teesside Centre for Realist Criminology, the two-day conference illustrated the breadth and vigour of critical thinking that is gaining traction within British criminology, and from the outset it was clear that critical perspectives on leisure and consumerism were beginning to proliferate. Papers on the cultures of binge drinking, graffiti, Parkour, counterfeits, and drug use from researchers such as Steve Wakeman, Theo Kindynis, Tammy Ayres, Alex Hall, Tom Raymen and myself hinted at a collective desire to push beyond tired narratives of political dissent or cultural resistance. Many of us as early career researchers were finding that the dominant theoretical perspectives failed to reflect the social worlds within which we were conducting our research. For this generation of criminologists, as Keith Hayward illustrated in a paper at the same conference, these traditional approaches rooted in symbolic interactionism and the forms of resistance identified through the work of the Birmingham School tended to massively over exaggerate the transformative political potential of consumption, and by extension commodified leisure practices. As Keith and I have recently noted in our chapter in the new edition of the Oxford Handbook of Criminology (2017: 309), ‘not only did Birmingham School researchers fail to grasp the inherent paradox of attempting to resist capitalism at the point of consumption, but they also dramatically underestimated capitalism’s ability to absorb so- called “inventive consumer resistance” and then (re)market it in the form of depoliticized items of dull conformity’.

Many of the papers presented at the NDC were drawn to the exciting new ideas that were synonymous with Teesside at the time. Ultra-realism’s incisive and penetrative analysis of the realities of life shaped by global consumer culture and neoliberal

ideology asserts that the empirical world exists suspended above a maelstrom of deeper forces, processes and structures which influence our interaction with the social. To fully understand the origins of crime and harm, we must acknowledge the unconscious drives that help perpetuate the dominant social order. By borrowing from ultra-realism, alongside the more recent critical strains of cultural criminology, 'deviant leisure' began to orient itself toward a reconceptualisation of social deviance and an exploration of how individual, social, economic, and environmental harms are structurally and culturally embedded within many accepted and normalized forms of leisure, asserting that criminologists need to travel beyond the boundaries associated with more traditional socio-legal constructions of crime and into the realm of harm and zemiology. While 'Deviance' is generally applied throughout the social sciences to describe behaviours that contravene socially accepted norms, values, and ethical standards (Downes and Rock 2007), a deviant leisure perspective seeks to invert this traditional interpretation. Rather, the starting point for much work around deviant leisure is that in an era characterised by the pursuit of cool individualism, the cultivation of many 'deviant' identities can be positioned and understood as steadfastly conformist. Put another way, what could within a more ethical social order be conceptualised as deviant behaviour is today being harnessed, pacified, and repositioned as a very specific form of creative dynamism that serves to propel desire for symbolic objects and experiences— desires which are then translated into demand within the circuits of consumption dominated by the leisure economy.

The point here is that a range of harms are embedded in culturally acceptable, value-normative behaviours, bound inextricably to what Slavoj Žižek terms the 'cultural injunction to enjoy'. Not only are these harms often experienced as hidden, systemic forms of violence, but in many cases are largely preventable. In short, prosocial forms of leisure are possible, but lie beyond what we term a hedonic realism, the inability to see beyond the horizon of a social order where leisure identity is synonymous with the hyper-competitive and individualised arena of consumer capitalism.

### **The harms of Deviant leisure**

Our typology uses the identified harm associated with various commodified leisure practices as its rationale. Harmful forms of deviant leisure are categorised according

to the primary focus of harms associated with them, and are divided into the following broad categories:

1. Subjective harms
2. Environmental harms
3. Socially Corrosive harms
4. Embedded harms

### **1. Subjective harms**

Subjective forms of harm involve an easily identifiable perpetrator visiting harm upon a clearly identifiable victim in action related to a clearly defined leisure activity. Perhaps the archetypal example of this is the commission of violence within the alcohol-based night time economy (NTE). The NTE has become synonymous with rising levels of interpersonal violence, often portrayed within the mainstream literature and media reporting as the pathological behaviour of a minority of working class men (and some women) whose actions taint an otherwise unproblematic site of creativity and identity gain. The reality is that the NTE is responsible for over a million hospital visits a year (a somewhat conservative figure which is likely to underestimate the reality of the number of assaults). In addition to this are the significant numbers of assaults on ambulance and emergency room staff who should also be considered victims of alcohol based violence. Outside of these clearly subjective forms of violence are swathes of objective forms of violence, systemic and symbolic violence meted out against other consumers, bar workers, takeaway workers, taxi drivers and other peripheral victims of deviant leisure.

The marketised environment of the night time economy is key to creating an arena of sorts for violent encounters. It is characterized by a near universal adherence to intoxication and the suspension of the moral regulation and behavioural norms of the daytime, but in the starkest of terms, it is this problematic and harmful form of determined drinking that is the most valuable from the perspective of the alcohol industry, accounting for 60% of the industry's profit. In this sense, gendered, racialized harms are written into the cultural and economic scripts of the NTE.

### **2. Environmental**

Green criminology has done much over the last 25 years to direct criminological attention at the harms inflicted upon the environment as a result of non-criminal activities, alongside criminal and harmful behaviours that emanate from interaction with the global economy. From a Deviant Leisure perspective, it is possible to interrogate not only the harms that result from engaging with leisure cultures, but explore the role of consumerism in the creation of individual desire and the cultivation of competitive individualism. Perhaps the starkest example can be found in at the point of impact between the tourist industry and low-lying destinations such as the Maldives who have to contend with environmental harms around destruction of delicate ecosystems, waste disposal and a scarcity of fresh water.

While the classic liberal defence of the tourist industry might rely on pointing to employment created by the tourist industry, in reality very few well-remunerated jobs go to indigenous islanders, while money haemorrhages out of the country due to high levels of foreign ownership and a high proportion of expatriate employment.

For Deviant Leisure, the challenges faced by the Maldives are not the product of tourism in an abstract sense, but are synonymous with the commodification of a range of symbolism that is closely related to consumer culture. The ubiquitous image that adorns specialist honeymoon magazines is of miles of white sands, empty but for the carefree linen-suited groom and his sarong-wearing new bride. However, the pristine beauty of the magazine is not as natural as we might suppose. Rather, the islands have been sanitised; depilated, shaved and plucked to the detriment of local ecosystems.

### **3. Socially Corrosive**

Here, we identify leisure forms that contribute to the erosion of our shared social life. Jean Baudrillard acknowledged the 'end of the social' with the dawn of neoliberalism, positioning consumer-citizens as increasingly atomised, cynical and disinterested in the possibility of collective interests. The social is constructed through a coherent and comprehensive socio-symbolic order, based in shared meanings and codes, which in their absence result in anxiety, unhappiness and despair, a constant state of emotional and existential precarity that can be temporarily assuaged by engagement in consumer markets.

A deviant leisure perspective must therefore examine the potential for leisure to cut individuals adrift from the social, contribute to the further erosion of social institutions such as family, class, community, and exacerbate the fragmented and individualized nature of the social under late capitalism. There are many forms of leisure that would fall into this category, but one example might be the creation of artificial scarcity, the privation of that which would otherwise be plentiful and free to the public. The creation of 'club goods' has the potential to create demarcated leisure zones of wealth and cultural capital. A clear demonstration of this is embodied within Donald Trump's grab for an enormous stretch of the Aberdeenshire coastline for the creation of a 'world-best' \$1.5 billion luxury golf-course, club, and hotel. Aided by a legal system that assiduously protects the interest of private property, these leisure spaces create cultures of fragmentation. Notwithstanding the environmental damage done to local dune ecosystems, within such spaces of cultural exclusivity, Trump's golf-course and other similar country clubs become a no-go zone for those lacking the requisite social, cultural and financial capital.

#### **4. Embedded Harm**

Here we position leisure cultures that are notable for becoming successfully embedded within legitimate consumer markets and while imbued with potential for the creation of malleable identities based on the notion of cool, are deserving of closer criminological scrutiny. Perhaps the most illustrative example is the ubiquitous gambling industry, which has become legitimised, and normalised through becoming embedded within other forms of leisure such as the consumption of professional sport, online social networks, and the night-time economy. With an increasing array of gambling opportunities, quite literally at our fingertips, it is likely that 'social' gambling, fiercely defended by the gambling industry as non-problematic, masks a range of damaging social and individual effects.

While once subject to wide-ranging state control, gambling has become increasingly embedded within the night-time economy, sports fandom, and online forums of socialisation. Perhaps nowhere is the legitimized democratisation of betting and gambling more visible than in the explosion of sports-betting, specifically around association football. It is impossible to watch any sports channel without being

bombarded by targeted advertising of innumerable high-street and online bookmakers which visually situate the act of gambling within a wider weekend leisure experience of friends, football and beer at the pub or at home with friends. These individuals experience participation in organised gambling as integral to broader circuits of leisure, consumption and identity as gambling becomes imbued with more than the simple outcome of winning or losing. Rather, the act of betting becomes irretrievably entangled with identity, with how one bets having the potential to act as a reflective mirror of who they are.

## **Conclusion**

To date, there has been limited critical analysis not just of how harm is a predictable externality of the commodification of leisure and leisure practices, but how the 'barbarity of leisure' is an intrinsic feature of the drives and energies which motivate leisure behaviours. As an increasing array of forms of 'deviant leisure' become culturally embedded within the mainstream and their attendant harms become normalised, deviant leisure scholars argue that criminology's usual focus on legally-defined crime and forms of deviance which controvert social norms and values requires some conceptual expansion. For a criminology that intends to keep up with a rapidly changing landscape of crime and harm, it is necessary to distance ourselves from the concept of crime and instead direct its attention towards the doxa of consumer culture and associated leisure industries. In order to understand and explain phenomena such as the statistical crime decline in the absence of any demonstrable improvement in social relations; in order to understand 'crime' and 'deviance' within a rapidly expanding zemiological field of economically and culturally normalised harm, criminology must examine the drives, desires, and underlying violence that underpin the social order. It is our hope that this expanding body of work offers a contribution to this perspective by proposing some conceptual foundations for a criminological analysis of 'deviant leisure'.

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