

MODS, ROCKERS AND THE REST: COMMUNITY REACTIONS TO JUVENILE DELINQUENCY*

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THIS paper deals with one part of a research project being carried out within a certain theoretical framework in criminology and the broader field of the sociology of deviance. To understand why certain aspects of the subject matter—the Mods and Rockers phenomenon—are being considered rather than others, it is necessary to provide a brief statement of this framework.

Theoretical Framework

The main purpose of the research project is to investigate social reaction to deviant behaviour. The rationale behind this approach was first set out in a strangely neglected textbook by Lemert¹ and systematized more recently by Becker². This approach views deviance as a transactional process, the result of interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it. Social reaction to deviance, the crucial variable in this approach, is largely ignored in conventional research in criminology and social deviance. In the field of juvenile delinquency, for example, the bulk of research is directed towards the taxonomic tabulation of the delinquents' traits (or attitudes, or values) in an attempt to see how delinquents differ from non-delinquents.³ On this basis causal theories are constructed. But the deviant act is not, or not only, deviant *per se*, it has to be defined and treated as such by the community. Social problems are what people think they are—there is an objective and verifiable situation, but also a subjective awareness of it and a definition by certain people that the situation is inimical to their interests and that something should be done about it⁴. The damage to art treasures by floods is a 'problem' to those whose commercial or aesthetic values are tied up with the preservation of art treasures. If this group of people didn't exist, there would be no problem. In the same way, the delinquent is a problem, but a problem *for someone*.

So when Becker writes that society creates deviance, he does not mean this in the conventional sense of there being social factors in the individual's situation which prompt his action, but that '... social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infractions constitute deviance, and by applying these rules to particular persons and labelling them as outsiders.' From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'.⁵ The audience, not the actor, is the crucial variable.

One effect of community reaction is to confirm the deviant in his self-identity. When the community reacts negatively to a person's deviation from valued norms, he tends to define his situation largely in terms of the reaction. He takes on a

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new self-concept, identifies himself in a new light and even begins to act like the stereotype of him. James Baldwin has vividly described the position of many Negroes in these terms: he notes how his father '... was defeated long before he died because . . . he really believed what white people said about him' and warned his nephew: 'You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger'.⁶

This reaction sequence sets into operation what Wilkins calls a 'deviation-amplifying system'⁷ and the present research is aimed at observing the workings of this sort of system. The sequence would run something like this:

1. Initial deviation from valued norms, leading to:
2. Punitive reaction by the community (which may lead to the segregation of groups and marking them as deviant):
3. Development of a deviant self-identity and behaviour appropriate to this identity:
4. Further punitive reaction, etc.

Although it is not within the scope of this lecture to develop the theme, it should be pointed out that this sort of analysis is not just a manipulation of theoretical models. As Wilkins himself has made very clear, the implications for social policy, in the fields of both treatment and prevention, are considerable. Schur has recently used this type of model to examine the impact of public policy on abortion, homosexuality and drug addiction.⁸ He shows, for example, how policy based often upon vital misconceptions about the nature of the deviant behaviour, may be expressed in legal prescriptions. This 'criminalization' of deviance then forces the individual into reinforcing a criminal self-image that creates problems for himself and society at large. The classic example, of course, is the creation of the addict sub-culture as partly at least a consequence of the public stereotype (the 'dope fiend') and repressive legislation. In the context of compulsory hospitalization, treatment may just reinforce the self-image.

The Present Study

Deviance is not a 'thing' which can be observed and studied. The term is a conceptual category and all we have are types of behaviour that have been classified as deviant. For research purposes we have to choose one of these types and juvenile delinquency is simply one such type that can be studied. Again though, juvenile delinquency is not a concrete enough category for this type of study—the term is a legal definition and not a behavioural syndrome. So, for reasons including its topical importance as a subject in its own right, the unit of study for this section of the project was narrowed down to what is classifiable (for want of a less emotive word) as 'hooliganism'. The Mods and Rockers phenomenon of the last three years, particularly in the form it took of disturbances and so-called riots at English seaside resorts over bank holiday weekends, provides an archetypal example of this behaviour.

Because we are using the transactional framework to explore certain aspects of the community reaction, the study is necessarily self limiting. It does not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the whole phenomenon e.g. in historical terms or in terms of sub-cultural theory.

Method

In an exploratory study of this nature there are few guidelines on which method to use for collecting data. In the event almost all possible methods were tried. These included:—content analysis of all press cuttings covering the period Easter 1963—August 1966 (national as well as relevant local press); 65 interviews carried out with a quota sample of spectators on the Brighton sea-front during Whitsun 1965; various other interviews with local figures, e.g. newspaper editors, local government officials, hotel proprietors, M.P.'s etc., and personal observation of crowd behaviour, police action and court hearings. (The final research report will also use data from 140 intensive interviews carried out in a London Borough on the more general topic of attitudes to delinquency.)

The Initial Deviation

Clacton is an East Coast resort not particularly well known for the range of amusements it provides for its younger visitors. Easter 1963 was worse than usual—it was cold and wet, in fact the coldest Easter Sunday for eighty years. The shopkeepers and the stall-owners were irritated by the lack of business and the young people milling around had their own irritation fanned by rumours of cafe owners and barmen refusing to serve some of them. A few groups started roughing around and for the first time the Mods and Rockers factions, a division at that time only vaguely in the air, started separating out. Those on bikes and scooters roared up and down, windows were broken, some beach huts were wrecked, one boy fired a starting pistol in the air. The vast number of young people crowding the streets, the noise, everyone's general irritation and the often panicky actions of an unprepared and undermanned police force, made the two days seem rather frightening.

One of the most significant features about Clacton is that there appear to have been present a number of what the police would call 'troublemakers'—mainly Rockers from the East End or small East Anglian villages. Contrasted with the fringe supporters, these are the same hard core who in race riots and other crowd situations are predisposed to take the initiative and to respond violently to what is perceived as police provocation. All the 24 boys charged in the Clacton court claimed that they had been the unlucky ones, that they had been picked out at random. Yet 23 out of the 24 had previous convictions—the police's chances of picking out 23 previous offenders at random out of a crowd of say a thousand, is one in a couple of million.

As we shall show, many aspects of the Mods and Rockers have parallels in the class of phenomena known as mass delusion. These studies⁹ show that the first stage is invariably a real event—the delusion or hysteria is created because the initial event is reported in such a way as to set in motion a cumulative sequence which serves to fulfill the expectations created by the earlier events. In terms of our model this is an amplifying process.

The Process of Amplification

One of the most important elements in the reaction to deviance is the growth of a generalised set of beliefs to explain the behaviour. Once the first stage of reporting is past, the community feels the need to make sense of what has occurred—this is especially the case when the event is perceived as a dislocation of the smooth running of things: the killing of a policeman, a political assassination, a natural disaster. People look for explanations, self-styled experts proclaim favourite theories, stereotypes are confirmed or new ones are created, words acquire a symbolic meaning—‘Aberfan’, ‘Dallas’, ‘Braybrook Street’, ‘Clacton’.

In the case of deviancy, these generalised beliefs invariably involve spurious attribution; all sorts of traits are attributed to the deviant and, on the basis of little or no evidence, a whole set of misconceptions arise. Let us give a few examples of some of these elements.

‘Violence and Damage’—it was widely believed that the Mods and Rockers caused widespread damage and were involved in violent assaults on each other or ‘innocent holidaymakers’. In fact the amount of damage done was not excessive—in the three year period there were less than ten cases of malicious damage—in Hastings, August 1964, for example, one of the ‘big’ events, there were only four charges of malicious damage out of 64 arrests.

During Whitsun 1964, although there were 54 arrests in Bournemouth the damage was £100, in Brighton with 76 arrests the damage was £400, in Margate with 64 arrests the damage was £250. Compare these figures to the *real* cost to the resorts which was in extra police charges: the four successive bank holidays between Easter 1965 and Easter 1966 cost the Brighton Council an extra £13,000. The amount of serious violence similarly was negligible—only one tenth of the original Clacton offenders were charged with offences involving violence. In Margate, Whitsun 1964, supposedly the most violent week-end, where according to the *Daily Express* (19/5/64) ‘The 1964 boys smeared the traditional postcard scene with blood and violence’, there were two not very serious stabbings and one man dropped onto a flower bed. The typical offence was using threatening behaviour or obstructing the police. Leaving aside the obvious inconvenience caused to adults by crowds of youths milling about on the pavements and beach, few innocent holidaymakers were the victims of violence—the targets were members of a rival group or, more often, the police.

'Loss of trade'—it was widely believed that the troubles scared potential visitors away and the resorts suffered financially. The evidence for this is at best dubious. Papers quoted figures from Brighton for Whitsun 1964 showing that the number of deck-chairs hired had dropped by 8,000 on the previous year's week-end. This drop was attributed to the effects of the Mods and Rockers. Analyses of other figures, however, show that the total number of visitors was probably more—the reason why fewer deckchairs were hired was that Whit Monday was one of the coldest for decades—the temperature had dropped overnight by 14° F. and the beaches were virtually deserted. Interviews and observation suggest that if anything, the Mods and Rockers attracted some visitors and by the end of 1965 certainly, the happenings were part of the Brighton scene—the pier, whelks and the Mods and Rockers could all be taken in on a day trip.

'Affluent Youth'—attitudes and opinions are often shaped and bolstered up by legends and myths. One of the most recurrent of the Mods and Rockers myths was the one about the boy who told the Margate magistrates that he would pay his £75 fine with a cheque. This myth was frequently used to justify the image of the Mods and Rockers as classless, affluent, and scooter or motor-bike owners. The story was in itself true enough—what few papers bothered to publish and what they all knew, was that the boy's offer was a pathetic gesture of bravado. He later admitted that not only did he not have the £75 cheque but did not even have a bank account and had never signed a cheque in his life. The affluence image has very little factual basis. The Clacton offenders had on them an average of 15/- for the whole bank holiday week-end. The best off was a window cleaner earning £15 a week, but more typical were a market assistant earning £7 10s. and a 17-year-old clerk earning £5 14s. The average take home pay in a sample of offenders from Margate, Whitsun 1964, was £11 per week. The classless image is also none too accurate—the typical Rocker was an unskilled manual worker, the typical Mod a semi-skilled manual worker¹⁰. In all cases, the majority of young people present hitched or came down by train or coach. The scooter and motor-bike riders were a minority, albeit a noisy and ubiquitous minority.

A detailed analysis of a number of other such images, shows that a large component of the deviation is, in Lemert's term, 'putative': 'The putative deviation is that portion of the societal definition of the deviant which has no foundation in his objective behaviour.'¹¹ Why is this sort of belief system important?

In the first place the stereotypes implied in the putative deviation serve to sensitize the community to any sign of incipient deviance. A previously ambiguous situation which may have been 'written off' as a Saturday night brawl now becomes re-interpreted as a 'Mods and Rockers clash'. In the weeks following the first two or three major happenings, a number of such incidents were reported

from widely scattered localities. Minor scuffles and fights and increased police vigilance were reported by the Press under such headings as 'Mods and Rockers Strike Again'. There were also numerous false alarms—after Whitsun 1964 for example, the police in Stamford Hill after answering a false alarm stated that 'people are a bit jumpy after the trouble on the coast'. This type of sensitization which turns non-events into events, is exactly the same process noted by students of mass delusion. In a state of hypersuggestibility following the reporting of a 'Mad Bomber' or a 'Phantom Anaesthetist' or a 'Sex Fiend On The Loose' ambiguous events are re-interpreted to fit into the belief. This is made easier when there is a composite stereotype available with readily identifiable symbols such as clothes. To the residents of Brighton, any boy between fourteen and twenty wearing a fur-collared anorak was a Mod. At the end of one Bank Holiday the police stood at the station putting back on the trains all 'suspicious looking' arrivals who could not prove that they were local residents.

Another way in which beliefs are important in amplifying deviance is that they serve to legitimate the action of society's agents of control. *If* you are dealing with a group that is vicious, destructive, causing your community a financial loss, and symbolically repudiating your cherished values, then you are justified to respond punitively. *If*, moreover, this is an affluent horde of scooter-riders, then 'fines won't touch them' and you have to propose confiscation of their scooters, forced labour camps, corporal punishment, turning the fire hoses on them. By the logic of their own definitions, the agents of control have to escalate the measures they take and propose to take to deal with the problem. So by Easter 1965 the magistrates in Brighton were employing the highly dubious practice of remanding young people in custody as a form of extra-legal punishment. Bail was refused not on the merits of the individual case but as a matter of principle—the ostensible reason given by the magistrates for remand as being to enable the police to make enquiries, was not in fact the reason given in court when bail was opposed. The police opposed bail on the grounds that if the boys were allowed to go free justice would not be done and that the public would not be protected. On the flimsiest evidence a boy, who by the police's own account had done nothing more than refuse to 'move along', would be certified as an 'unruly person', refused bail and remanded in custody in an adult prison—in some cases for up to three weeks. A test case of this sort when taken before a Judge in Chambers resulted in the immediate release of a 16-year-old boy from prison on bail. Although precise data is difficult to obtain, at least 20 cases have been traced of successful appeals on the grounds of wrongful arrests or disproportionately high sentences. There is no doubt that in certain cases, admittedly under conditions of extreme physical and psychological strain and under direct provocation, arrests were made quite arbitrarily and with unnecessary violence. In one instance, arrested youths were observed being pushed through a gauntlet of police punches before literally being thrown into the van.

Informal agents of social control also took up extreme positions. On the initiative of a group of senior aldermen and councillors, the Brighton Council overwhelmingly passed a resolution calling for the setting up of compulsory labour camps for Mods and Rockers. A group of Great Yarmouth businessmen and hotel-keepers set up a Safeguard Committee which seriously debated a scheme of setting up road blocks outside the town to prevent any invasion.

We have discussed three types of processes identifiable in the reaction: the growth of generalised beliefs, which contain a putative element, the sensitization to deviance and the escalation of methods of social control. To evaluate the effects of the reaction on the self image we would need a more complicated type of research design than has been used here—a longitudinal study of the impact of community reaction on young people's self concepts. At present we can only use the overt behaviour as the dependent variable and assume that this behaviour is consonant with the actors' self image.

In the first place, as we have seen, the behaviour was often 'created' because of community sensitization. The atmosphere of expectancy present at the seaside resorts resulted in incidents being created out of nothing.

Two boys stopped to watch a very drunk old tramp dancing about on the beach. They started throwing pennies at his feet. Within 45 seconds there were at least a hundred people gathered round and in 60 seconds the police were there. I turned my back on the crowd to watch the spectators gathering on the promenade above and by the time I turned back, two policemen were leading a boy away from the crowd.

(Notes, Brighton, Easter 1965).

Incidents such as these were created by sensitivity on the part of both audience and actors. There was a sense among the young people that they had to play to the gallery; the literal gallery of the adults lining the railing as at a bullfight, and the photographers running around from one event to the other; and the metaphorical gallery of the consumers of the mass media who had read in their morning papers 'Seaside Resorts Prepare for the Hooligans' Invasion'. The control agents, especially the police, created deviance not only in the sense of provoking the more labile members of the crowd into losing their tempers, but in Becker's sense of making the rules whose infraction constituted deviance. So, for example, certain areas were designated in advance as 'trouble spots'. If a number of youths were congregating in one of these trouble spots even for legitimate reasons (such as sheltering from the rain) they could be moved along, because policy was to keep these spots free. If one refused to move along he could be arrested and charged with wilful obstruction. (Under Sec. 51(3) Police Act 1964.)

Another significant effect of the reaction was, in Tannenbaum's phrase, the 'dramatization of evil'. The adult reaction was not only negative—it could hardly have been otherwise—but it was hostile in the melodramatic sense. There was the famous speech by a Margate magistrate about his town being

'... polluted by hordes of hooligans . . . these long-haired mentally unstable petty little hoodlums, these sawdust Caesars who can only find courage like rats hunting in packs'; there were the newspaper headlines about 'vermin'; there was the show of force on the spot—police dogs, horses, walkie talkies, water board vans converted into squad cars; there were scenes like the police ceremoniously marching a group of youths through a street lined with spectators.

One way in which this hostility was reacted to was by returning it in kind. In the first series of events, the crowd, with the exception of the hard core referred to earlier, maintained fairly good humoured relations with the police. Attacks were disrespectful gestures such as knocking off helmets rather than malicious. In the 1966 incidents, the atmosphere was more tense. The lines had hardened:

A policeman walked quite peacefully between two rows of boys near the aquarium. Some of them started whistling the Z-car theme and one shouted out 'Sprachen the Deutsch Constable'?

—(Notes, Brighton, Easter 1966).

Another way in which the conflict was hardened was between the two groups themselves. Although the Mods and Rockers represent two very different consumer styles—the Mods the more glossy fashion-conscious teenager, the Rockers the tougher, reactionary tradition—the antagonism between the two groups is not very deep, they have much more in common, particularly their working class membership. There was initially nothing like the gang rivalry supposed to characterise the American type of conflict gang caricatured in *West Side Story*, in fact there was nothing like a gang. Commercial and media exploitation of the Mod-Rocker difference, and misguided attempts to explain the whole situation of unrest in terms of this difference, hardened the barriers. The groups were merely loose collectivities or crowds within which there was occasionally some more structured grouping based on territorial loyalty. e.g. 'The Walthamstow Boys', 'The Lot From Eltham'. Constant repetition of the gang image made these collectivities see themselves as gangs and behave in a gang fashion. Yablonsky has noted the same process in his study of delinquent gangs as near groups.¹²

The Role of the Mass Media

Without being able to consider here all the mechanisms through which the reaction was amplified, it is necessary to comment on the most important of these, the mass media. One must remember that in mass society one's view of deviance is usually second hand. In the hypothetical village community one might have been able to react to the village idiot in terms of first-hand impressions. In mass society images arrive already processed—policymakers can and do make decisions about say delinquents or drug addicts on the basis of the most crude and misleading images. In the case of the Mods and Rockers the media were responsible to a large extent for the putative deviance. An analysis, for

example, of the House of Commons debate on 'Juvenile Delinquency and Hooliganism' (27th April 1964) shows the extent to which the images and stereotypes provided by the media were the basis for theories and policy proposals.

It is not just that the newspapers exaggerated the amount of behaviour—this is more or less inevitable. Estimates in any crowd situation such as a political rally or sporting event are notoriously inaccurate. What was more important was the manner of presentation—the sensational headlines, the interviews with dramatic characters and subtle techniques well known to war correspondents, such as reporting the same incident twice. Another effective technique was the misleading juxtaposition of headlines—on at least three occasions headlines such as 'Mod Found Dead in Sea', 'Boy Falls to Death from Cliff' were used as sub-headings in Mods and Rockers reports. In every case the deaths had no connection at all with the disturbances and were pure accidents.

The chief rôle of the media seem to have been in transmitting the stereotypes and creating an expectancy before each event that something was going to happen. This last rôle was particularly taken by the local press which highlighted reports about local traders arming themselves with tear gas, citizens forming vigilante patrols, etc.

Differential Reaction

It is, of course, a fallacy to think of the mass media influencing a purely passive audience. Communication is responded to selectively, and the sort of questions we would like to answer are:—To what extent were the stereotypes and images absorbed by the community? How did the reaction crystallize into attitudes and opinions (e.g. about causes and solutions)? How were these attitudes affected by variables such as social class, education, political membership? Why did the reaction take the form it did?

The final research report will attempt to answer these questions. A preliminary analysis of the data from the Brighton sample only, suggest that the following type of generalisations might emerge:—

1. The reaction of the general public is less intense and less stereotypical than the reaction reflected in the mass media.
2. Local residents in the areas affected are more punitive than out of town visitors and the public in general.
3. Little difference between the Labour and Conservative groups were found. Except at the extreme of authoritarianism, political preference does not correlate with attitudes to delinquency.
4. The two most frequent single causes given for the Mods and Rockers events are 'boredom' and 'too much money'.
5. A dimension such as 'punitiveness' is too gross to measure attitudes to deviant behaviour. Certain groups, particularly working class and upper

class, can at the same time be 'tolerant' of the behaviour and also devise the most punitive solutions for dealing with the behaviour when it is perceived as 'going too far'. The middle class less often make this distinction.

Conclusion

It must be emphasised again that as this is an analysis of the ways in which social reaction impinges upon the genesis and amplification of deviance, little has been said about the behaviour itself. This does not mean that one is trying to deny an objective reality or even less trying to present the Mods and Rockers as innocent victims of conspiracy and discrimination. Social forces work in far more subtle ways. Although people *were* inconvenienced or hurt, and there were fights and vandalism, there is at the very least enough evidence to suggest that the development of this behaviour was not independent of the reaction it provoked. Can one go further and say that the transactional theory is proved?

Clearly the present study is not a complete validation. For one thing, the crucial variable of the deviant self identity has not been measured and it might be a defect of the theory that this type of variable is peculiarly difficult to operationalise. There are problems in the model immediately apparent—for example why does the Wilkins-type of amplification sequence ever stop? Theoretically something like the Teddy Boy movement should have carried on growing. We know that this did not happen and there are already signs that the Mods and Rockers are going the same way. There are obviously factors 'outside' the model to account for these changes. Another problem is why not everybody exposed to the same definitions develops the appropriate self-image.

Until such questions are answered, we can only conclude that transactional theory provides a potentially useful framework for studying deviance. In the case of the Mods and Rockers at least, it gives an additional dimension to any other causal explanation.

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