

Has Booze Brought the Blues?

Psychedelics and Human Consciousness

Jack Straw

One of the major topics debated in this newspaper and others like it is the reason(s) for the dramatic change in social organization during the transition from “primitive” societies to the “modern” one. Most contemporary anthropological accounts agree that the vast majority of human life has been lived in non-hierarchical, cooperative communities. Then why did the last ten thousand years or so result in a hierarchical, competitive society which has expanded its bounds to encompass virtually the entire globe?

Some see the “fall” as resulting from climatic or other environmental pressures. Others see a conscious choice by proto-elites to live differently and impose their will on the rest of the population. Still others see our course as the inevitable result of a shift away from immediate, spontaneous play toward symbolic/premeditated activity, be it the development of agriculture, or language, or possibly even tool-making.

Archeologists Marja Gimbutas and Riane Eisler claim the change came about as the result of the invasion of peaceful, cooperative agrarian societies in the Mediterranean area by warring nomads from the harsh margins such as deserts or the cold North Eurasian plains. However, several new books implicitly and explicitly bring in a new factor, pharmacological social practice.

In *Plants of the Gods*, Richard Schultes and Albert Hofmann (inventor of LSD) discuss the historic and contemporary use of plant hallucinogens by aboriginal peoples. The book catalogs ninety-seven species known to be (or to have been) utilized, detailing fourteen of them and describing the ways and reasons they are used. These include cannabis, many species of fungi, cacti, vines and other plants. The parts employed include roots, stems, flowers and even seeds such as those of the morning glory flower, which contain a form of lysergic acid.

Practice is common, indeed prevalent, on most continents. The methods of usage include direct ingestion, smoking, sniffing and enemas as well as food, drink or salve preparations. In many cases, the plants are used only by specialists such as medicine men or women (usually men). Certain tribes limit participation to males, but in many others, both sexes participate, with the women taking a leading role in some cases. Very few indigenous peoples show patterns of abuse. Use is regarded as a sacred spiritual practice, and often is an initiation rite required for tribal members. Recreational use is not excluded as many societies do not separate the spiritual and the recreational.

Tribes often regard the psychedelic experience as being in the “real” world, distinct from the “ordinary” state which is deemed a fantasy. Ritual “tripping” is viewed as a practice which centers the individual, connecting her or him with the earth and the universe. Tribal relations are cemented by these ceremonies, which makes sense given the tendency of psychedelics to dissolve boundaries between people, as well as between people and their environment, and induce awareness of an overarching totality.

In *Food of the Gods*, Terence McKenna takes things further. He asserts that the use of hallucinogenic fungi goes back a million years, and may be responsible for the evolution of distinctly human characteristics in pre-hominids. Tests show that the psychotropic mushroom psilocybin acts to improve vision, enhance sexual drive and stimulate

the language center in the brain. A species of walking apes using it would likely gain an advantage in evolutionary adaptation based on gathering and hunting.

More concretely, McKenna uses archeological evidence to argue that a rich, nomadic psilocybin-using culture, the Tassili, existed in North Africa about 10,000 years ago. The data, around for a while, has been largely ignored. The richness of the artwork displayed on its artifacts suggest this culture could very well have been the Eden referred to in many Mediterranean myths.

Further evidence strongly suggests a link with the Tassili to the Natufian culture of early Palestine, and thus to a connection with later pre-Greek societies in Asia-Minor and Southeast Europe. Gimbutas and Eisler argue convincingly and provide evidence that these societies, while not ideal, were essentially cooperative and peaceful, and far more accomplished in diverse endeavors such as advanced plumbing and intricate artwork than the so-called great civilizations which superseded them.

A change in climate, which resulted in the drying of the region, led to a decreased supply of mushrooms. People gradually turned toward using the fungi less frequently (down from twice a month to a few times a year, evidenced by fewer illustrations of fungi and ceremonies on artifacts as time proceeded), and preserved them between uses in honey, a well-known natural preservative. Honey ferments in time to become mead, which contains alcohol. Thus, ceremonies increasingly became alcohol oriented. This transition is hinted at in the Greek myth of Glaukos, the youth whose name means blue-gray (like freshly-picked 'shrooms), who was preserved in a honey jar.

While psychedelics tend to dissolve the ego and enhance tribal relations based upon non-hierarchical cooperation, alcohol encourages isolation and alienation by numbing the brain. What a perfect medium for the growth and eventual triumph of competitive, aggressive attitudes. (I am not saying alcohol is inherently "bad," but merely noting its well-demonstrated effects.) McKenna asserts (and I agree) that the waning of psychedelic practice in favor of alcohol had a tremendous impact on ethics, ideology and social structure. The difference between a Native Americans strung out on alcohol and ones engaged in a tribal peyote ceremonies seems obvious.

Many Middle Eastern myths involve this transition. A prominent and culturally coded example is the biblical story of the "Original Sin." When the serpent, an ancient feminine symbol for the earth-as-Mother, urged Eve to eat the Fruit of Knowledge (openly described as a mushroom in many other regional myths) and then "corrupt" Adam, it resulted in Humanity's expulsion from Eden, with an angel wielding a flaming sword (the hot sun), guarding against our return.

Hebrew Myths by Robert Graves and Raphael Patai offers a thorough discussion of this myth as the oldest justification for the imposition of patriarchy, the Judeo-Christian work ethic and authoritarian social structure. The purge from Eden can also be seen as a rationalization for the cessation of psychedelic practice

The Dionysian Rituals and Eleusinian Mysteries of ancient Crete and Greece were the region's last holdouts of the ancient rites. Until about 30 years ago, they were thought to be alcohol centered ceremonies, but investigations by Gordon Wasson, Robert Graves and Albert Hofmann point to the centrality of either mushrooms baked into cakes, or beer containing ergot, a grain fungus which includes lysergic acid. In 415 BC, the Athenian noble Alcibindes was fined for having the sacrament in his home, making it unlikely that the sacrament was mere alcohol.

With time, the ceremonies turned from psychedelic free-form festivals into drunken militarized orgies, and were later abolished altogether. Patriarchy cannot tolerate the sexual freedom or unfettered play implicit in the ecstatic enactment of bacchanal. Women who seek complete sexual emancipation often refuse the patrilineal practice necessary to maintain ancestral links to the Father God and the Father King. This autonomy of the person who sees visions and the polytheism of psychedelic culture conflict with the demand for passive obedience or submission to authority required by a transition to organized, hierarchical religion.

In the Western Hemisphere, use of hallucinogens by indigenous peoples continues to this very day. It is often a major aspect of a culture's resistance to the encroaching megamachine. While cultures which developed into hierarchical empires (Aztecs, Mayans) eliminated usage by commoners, the elites continued, a fact which helps explain why these cultures did not become as alienated from the natural world as did Western Civilization.

It is interesting that many North American tribes picked up their present-day practices after migration to their eventual homelands, after long periods of non-usage or use of other, less benign plants such as the datura. For example, the Huichols of Mexico used mescal beans while migrating through today's Western U.S., but turned to peyote once they came across it in their present home territory. 3000 years later, they continue to use it regularly.

This would tend to indicate both a preference for usage and that through oral history they retained memories of similar practices in Asia, which would date the use of hallucinogens back at least 25,000 years.

A common tribal belief in Alaska is that a shaman's urine has magical powers. Until recent times, Siberian tribes engaged in ceremonies involving mushrooms, and people often drank the urine of psychedelized shamans, since it contained psychoactive ingredients in concentrated form. Contrary to some opinion, shamans do not consistently occupy positions of social control and often exist on the fringe of the tribe.

The alteration of consciousness is not merely another form of pleasure-seeking disconnected from the rest of life as shopping and "leisure" consumption are under capital. It appears to be a fundamental drive among many animal species, as with cats and catnip. The method by which we satisfy this desire is likely to have important ramifications for the way we live. The stifling of hallucinogen use by Western Civilization reveals its unconscious fear of a return to chaos, with drug use representing a disruption of established social structures and challenge to conventional thought patterns. Such repression has included the persecution of "witches," the constraint of the psychedelic practices of the indigenous peoples of this hemisphere, and the "Reefer Madness" and "War on Drugs" in this century.

This millennia of repression has coincided with the promotion of the "correct" drugs. Alcohol is an obvious example. In addition, up to the mid-19th century the global empire's major trade goods were legal drugs, specifically sugar, tobacco, coffee and tea, grown on plantations for the increased consumption in the home base. These are still major moneymakers, as are prescription drugs and opiates, in whose trade the empire's role is more surreptitious. These substances support the rhythms of the global work machine and promote separate, competitive behavior.

While it's not true that "everybody must get stoned" for social transformation to occur, widespread use will tend to open up minds, destabilize internal and external authority and belief structures, and connect with what Blake called "The Divine Imagination" and the Surrealists called "The Marvelous." It is not the right thing for everybody all the time, and never for some people, due to physical or psychological factors. Widespread abuse and the commodification of psychedelic experience seriously diminishes the mind expanding possibilities.

We must confront those puritanical leftists and anarchists among us who scorn use of hallucinogens either out of their culture bound preference for alcohol (a substance which ironically fits so well with the culture we're trying to overthrow), or out of Christian-like moralism. Such indictments against ingestion often involve an attitude that any usage is a sign of "immaturity," frequently associated with the moraliser's own adolescence. We can't go back in time, but the use of psychedelics as a social practice is something we can learn about from ancient and contemporary "primitive" societies, and apply to our own situation.

Since LSD had its heyday in the counter-cultural revolution of the late 60's and early '70s, it is nothing new for North American radicals to suggest the liberatory potential of psychedelic practice. A return to hallucinogens in the context of sacred ritual promises the dissolution of anthropocentric social boundaries and a realization of our interconnectedness in the web of wilderness.

This is only possible if we can depart from the stylized recuperation of most recreational "tripping" by commodity culture which sterilizes the potential for enlightenment in favor of superficiality and shallow stimulation. If our communal use of psychedelics comes with a critique of coffee, booze, aspirin, tobacco and the totality of capital, getting "stoned" can help us shed the plastic skin of the spectacle and spiritually participate in communities of resistance.

Hopefully, future generations will get high only for pleasure and exploration, and not to escape a horrible reality.

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