

**Psychopharmacology in an Age of Planetary
Crisis**
What Role for Psychedelics?
By Mike Albert

There is no shortage of signs that we live in an age of crisis. Climate change and its effects are already exceeding the worst-case scenario predictions of scientists from a decade ago, while rates of biodiversity loss are ascending as if a comet had struck the planet, with over 60% of animal populations being lost since 1970 and insects on pace to be wiped out by the end of the century (Ripple et al, 2017). While often less remarked, there is also growing recognition of a global “mental health crisis” seen in increasing rates of depression, anxiety, suicide, and drug abuse. The World Health Organization drafted a report in 2012 calling depression *the* major health hazard of this century, which is estimated to affect 350 million people worldwide and predicted to become the 2nd leading cause of world disability by 2020 (and possibly the largest by 2030) (Marcus et al, 2012).

Given these crises, which are likely to converge as climate change intensifies ongoing mental health epidemics, it is clear that the fields of psychotherapy and psychopharmacology have a critical role to play in addressing them. However, as earlier 20th century critics pointed out (e.g. Marcuse, 1962), these fields for the most part continue to naturalize and reinforce the consumer capitalist “reality principle” that is arguably at the root of these crises: a vision of the human as a rational, ego-centric, utility-maximizing agent that is autonomous from nature and community (ibid: 35). In this way they mainly serve to help patients restore a socially conditioned understanding of “mental health” that limits our understanding of the human being and reinforces psychosocial patterns that are largely responsible for our current planetary crisis.

Against these tendencies, I will argue that to confront our era of planetary crisis requires challenging these underlying conceptions of “mental health”, the political-economic structures that reinforce them, and the psychopharmacological regimes that sustain them. Might the recent psychedelic renaissance help form the basis of a more transformative alternative? I will suggest that psychedelics have the potential to constitute an alternative paradigm of mental health and psychopharmacology that can

transform rather than reinforce the consumer capitalist reality principle at the root of contemporary crises. However, to do so it will need to challenge this reality principle and its underlying assumptions about “mental health” head on, rather than merely constituting a novel form of therapy that helps individuals adjust to socioeconomic demands. While many within the psychedelic legalization movement are understandably wary of such “counter-hegemonic” strategies, I will argue that the broader context of planetary crisis should tip the balance in favor of more radical and visionary approaches. As many recognize, the unique transformative potential of psychedelics is too important to be reduced to a struggle for legalizing new therapeutic techniques, vital though this is. Rather, it can and should be part of a broader struggle to invent new ways of life and more sustainable relations to the natural world – in short, a “new reality principle”.

The Co-emergence of Modern Capitalism and Modern Psychopathology

While global mental health epidemics may be a recent phenomena, their roots were planted firmly in the dynamics of early capitalist expansion and its subsumption of pre-modern lifeworlds. Capitalism here is understood as a social system in which profit maximization is the primary goal of the economy (rather than the satisfaction of basic needs), individuals are divested from control over their laboring process and forced to sell their labor-power to survive, and the monetized exchange of commodities displaces social relations based on reciprocity. From the beginning the expansion of capitalist production has involved processes of what Marx called “primitive accumulation” in which pre-modern social ties are dissolved and replaced with market-based transactions, common lands are enclosed, and nature is converted into an abstract exchangeable commodity (Marx, 1976). As Karl Polanyi famously observed, these (often violent and traumatic) processes gave rise to a self-regulating market economy in which social relations became “embedded in the economic system”, rather than the “economy being embedded in social relations” (Polanyi, 1957: 57).

The crucial thing for our purposes is to understand how the rise of capitalism was associated with the emergence of the modern “reality principle”, or the creation of an individualized ego that subordinates instinctual drives to the ends of economic productivity, myth to rationality, and nature to human utility, thereby becoming the “homo economicus” of neoclassical economics (Swader, 2012). Freud understood the “reality principle” as the repression of humanity’s primary instincts towards instant gratification for the sake of meeting the demands of the external world, though critical sociologists like Herbert Marcuse emphasize that we must understand the socially conditioned forms that the reality principle assumes in different historical contexts (Marcuse, 1962: 31). Marcuse uses the term “performance principle” to conceptualize the “prevailing form of the reality principle” in modern capitalist civilization (ibid: 32). As he explains: “the performance principle...is that of an acquisitive and antagonistic society in the process of constant expansion” in which “society is stratified according to the competitive economic performances of its members...[and] body and mind are made into instruments of alienated labor” (ibid: 41-42). In this sense, the performance principle can be understood as the specific form of repression that molds individuals to the demands of a capitalist society, thereby devaluing the natural world and subordinating the primary instincts – expressed in the realms of art, mythology, and play – to the ends of continuously expanding productivity. Due to this historically contextual understanding of the reality principle, Marcuse was more optimistic regarding the possibility of a non-repressive relation to the primary instincts. But rather than advocating for their free reign, Marcuse instead called for a “new reality principle” in which labor would take the form of play and aesthetic creation, while humanity and nature would be sensuously re-unified “so that fulfillment of man is at the same time the fulfillment, without violence, of nature” (ibid: 151).

The counterculture of the 1960s provided hope that a new reality principle was in bloom, though the past few decades have been dominated by the “neoliberal

counterrevolution”, which re-affirmed the dominance of market-based values like profit maximization, economic efficiency, and individualized consumption. The counterculture mounted a struggle for genuine self-expression, though advertisers would capitalize on these desires to create niche markets while weakening feelings of collective solidarity (Hamilton, 2010). This has brought about what Clive Hamilton calls the era of “individualization”, which sows the conditions for modern consumerism by enabling “marketers of goods to step in and satisfy the desire to find and express a self, to exploit the desire for self-rule” (ibid: 573). Of course, this form of individualized consumerism can never lead to genuine satisfaction, thereby provoking tendencies towards chronic restlessness, despair, depression, and compensatory behaviors like substance abuse and self-medication (ibid: 572). As Chris Swader writes, individualization in this way becomes “a personal predicament in which individuals long for an intimacy their societies can no longer provide” (Swader, 2012: 28). While it can have personal benefits – including space for greater self-expression, diminished constraints imposed by community and tradition, and openness to diversity (ibid) – it creates a one-sided form of subjectivity that dissociates the individual from community, nature, and the deeper layers of the psyche while fueling ecologically destructive patterns of consumerism.

The Contemporary Mental Health Crisis and Psychopharmacology

It is in this context that we should understand growing rates of depression and other forms of mental illness worldwide. As noted earlier, the World Health Organization (WHO) drafted a report in 2012 showing that depression had become a worldwide epidemic (Marcus et al, 2012). Recent studies also show that ongoing epidemics of loneliness, social isolation, anxiety, and drug abuse pose an equal danger to public health, which may be responsible for rising suicide rates in the US (up 30% between 2000 and 2016) and elsewhere (Brueck, 2018). In the words of a recent report from the Lancet, these trends signify “a collective failure to respond to this global health crisis”, thereby

resulting “in monumental loss of human capabilities and avoidable suffering” (quoted in Boseley, 2018).

However, most analysts say little about *why* depression and other mental health epidemics have become so widespread. This perspective is in part enabled by the common refrain that depression is an “illness of the brain”, which effaces its sociological conditions of emergence and reinforces an individualized and reductive understanding of mental illness. It is also symptomatic of what cultural critic Mark Fisher calls “capitalist realism,” defined as the widespread understanding that *there is no alternative to capitalism* (despite growing awareness of its pathological tendencies) (Fisher, 2009). This shared background assumption creates an atmosphere in which the underlying structural conditions that generate (or at the very least exacerbate) mental health problems are ignored, which are reduced to individual problems requiring medical fixes. In his words,

Capitalist realism insists on treating mental health as if it were a natural fact, like weather...we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The ‘mental health plague’ in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional (ibid: 19).

For example, while the WHO recognizes the connection between poverty, unemployment, and increased instances of mental illness, they refrain from critiquing the political-economic drivers of these conditions, instead proposing palliative measures like “resilience-building mental health promotion programs for unemployed people” (Marcus et al, 2012: 16). In this way, only the symptoms of a deeper psychosocial malaise are addressed, while any question of transforming their political-economic conditions of emergence is considered off limits. At the same time, this approach enables huge profits to be made by pharmaceutical companies who hold significant influence over how these problems are defined and treated, which enables them to sell expensive psychiatric drugs conducive to dependency-formations.

Nikolas Rose documents the rise of the psycho-pharmaceutical industry worldwide in the past few decades: psychiatric drug consumption grew over 125% in the

UK and over 600% in the US between 1990 and 2000; at the end of the decade in the US, sales of prescribed psychiatric drugs amounted to almost \$19 billion, which accounted for nearly 18% of the total pharmaceutical market (Rose, 2003: 47). Rose shows how new forms of neuroscientific knowledge have been instrumentalized by pharmaceutical corporations to develop profitable drugs; for example, the “serotonin hypothesis” concerning the origins of depression has been actively promoted by pharmaceutical companies despite minimal experimental evidence. This is because such a reductive explanation is conducive to developing drugs that target specific neurotransmitters, which becomes an effective marketing strategy for selling drugs to people seeking medical fixes to their mental health problems (58). In Rose’s words, “the profit to be made from promising health—has become the prime motive force in generating what counts for our knowledge of mental ill health” (ibid).

In this way, mainstream approaches to mental health and psychopharmacology not only serve primarily to help individuals conform more effectively to the demands of a capitalist economy, but also institutionalize a “psychopharmacological-industrial complex” with little interest in addressing the root causes of mental illness (the source of its profitability). As Nikolas Rose writes, we must therefore recognize that psychiatric drugs “are entangled with certain conceptions of what humans are or should be”, along with particular modes of political-economic organization (Rose, 2003: 59). The question, then, becomes whether or not an alternative mental health and psychopharmacological paradigm oriented around different conceptions of what humans are and can become is possible.

Enter the Psychedelic Renaissance

Might psychedelics form the basis of an alternative economy and culture of mental health? The field of psychedelic research is currently witnessing a renaissance thanks largely to the pioneering efforts of Roland Griffiths at Johns Hopkins University,

the Beckley Foundation, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), and others. Recent studies show great promise in the capacity of psychedelics to make progress on seemingly intractable conditions like depression, PTSD, and fear of death in terminally ill patients (Pollan, 2018). One of the exciting lessons of psychedelic research is its identification of the “Default Mode Network” (DMN) as both “a central *orchestrator or conductor* of global brain function” and a common denominator for different forms of mental illness (Carhart-Harris et al, 2014: 6). Psychedelics have been shown to disrupt the DMN and facilitate cross-communication between different regions of the brain, thereby enhancing neural plasticity and quieting (if not dissolving) the ego’s hierarchy over cognition. This can induce “mystical” states of consciousness – characterized by dissolution of boundaries between self and world and ecstatic feelings of love and connection to the universe – and weaken the neural pathways at the basis of depression, anxiety, and addiction (ibid: 15). These experiences have not only been shown to help individuals overcome these ailments; studies also suggest that psychedelic users experience greater concern for others, feel deeper care for and connection to the environment, and place lower value on financial motivations (Carhart-Harris & Lyons, 2018) – precisely the opposite of the consumer capitalist performance principle in process of laying waste to the planet.

Thus there is clear potential for a psychedelic revolution in psychopharmacology to contribute to the broader cultural shift needed to transform our relations to nature and create a more sustainable and just political-economic system. However, there is a risk that psychedelics will simply become another therapy technique that helps individuals adapt more effectively to the demands of the capitalist reality/performance principle. In particular, it is not difficult to imagine psychedelics going the route of “McMindfulness” (i.e. meditation used to improve individual relaxation without the broader aims of ethical and spiritual transformation) (Purser & Loy, 2013), which would be the case if the psychedelic movement aims merely for integration with mainstream culture (as some like

MAPS founder Rick Doblin seem to hope for) (Pollan, 2018: 400). Psychedelics may be less liable to co-optation than mindfulness and other psychoactive substances, due to their raw power to (temporarily) shatter the consumer capitalist ego as well as their limited potential profitability and patentability (at least so far) (ibid). But there is a need to couple these experiences with a novel mental health paradigm that recognizes the psychic and ecological unsustainability of the modern reality principle and works towards an alternative vision of “mental health”. As Michael Pollan documents, this is clearly a strong tendency within the community of underground psychedelic therapists (ibid). However, others appear reticent to follow this route.

For example, in a landmark paper on psychedelic neuroimaging research, Robin Carhart-Harris and colleagues appear to reduce psychedelic states to a “regressive style of cognition” characterized by “magical thinking” (i.e. that interprets the world according to what an individual “wants to be true”), as opposed to the “mature ego” that characterizes “healthy adults” (Carhart-Harris et al, 2014: 6-7). They even go so far as implying that depression may be seen as an “evolutionarily advanced state” that involves “accurate reality testing” (ibid: 9-10). This is problematic on both epistemological and political grounds, appearing to assume both that ordinary consciousness is in fact a reliable basis for “reality-testing” rather than a selective psycho-social construction, and that the modern ego constitutes the “end” of evolution rather than a tenuous and largely maladaptive construction that stands in the way of further human evolution. Furthermore, as Jeremy Lent emphasizes, it is this style of cognition that has been responsible for the “devastating destruction of indigenous cultures around the world and our current global rush towards possible catastrophe” (Lent, 2017: 19). Indigenous peoples, informed by psychedelic shamanism and animistic principles, developed sustainable cultures that survived for thousands of years; modern capitalist civilization, on the other hand, has given us a disenchanting “reality principle” that promotes belief in infinite growth and

human mastery even as signs of ecological collapse intensify all around us. Who is really guilty of “magical thinking” here?

To be fair to Carhart-Harris and colleagues, it seems likely that their reticence to challenge the modern reality principle is attributable to the desire to gain legitimacy within the mainstream psychopharmacological establishment. Indeed, as Michael Pollan documents, this is an ongoing source of tension in the psychedelic community, with some envisioning a new approach that goes beyond therapy towards the “betterment of well people”, many emphasizing strict adherence to mainstream medical norms, and others poised ambiguously between these poles (Pollan, 2018: 399-402). On one hand, there is good reason to be wary of the counter-hegemonic radicalism of the Timothy Leary approach, which was in large part responsible for setting back the field of psychedelic research for decades. On the other hand, the transformative potential of psychedelics is too immense to be limited to mainstream therapeutic applications alone, as many within the movement recognize.

While there is no need for the psychedelic community to unify itself behind a single aim or vision, I believe that an adequate appreciation of the magnitude of contemporary global crises suggests that the balance should tip in favor of more radical and visionary approaches. Not only is the earth being imperiled by accelerating climate change and biodiversity loss; the global capitalist system is itself in deep crisis, with debt reaching record levels and many fearing a prolonged period of stagnation and recurrent financial crises (Streeck, 2017). On top of this, we are witnessing a surge in reactionary and exclusionary forms of populism that advocate violence towards racialized others and a hyper-masculinist, authoritarian, and anti-ecological vision of social order – eerily reminiscent of Europe in the 1930s (Neiwert, 2017). When we bring this broader context of planetary crisis into view, it becomes apparent that a narrow conception of the psychedelic movement that conforms to or leaves unchallenged the consumer capitalist reality/performance principle – itself the psychosocial foundation of our current

ecological, political-economic, and mental health crises – is insufficient. Rather than only fighting to legalize new therapies to aid mentally distressed individuals or even the “betterment of well people” (i.e. the path of “McMindfulness”), vital though this is, this struggle could also be joined to a broader process of social transformation, healing, and ecological regeneration. It remains to be seen what a more socially engaged psychedelic movement would look like in practice, but a good start would be for psychedelic organizations to make deeper connections with contemporary environmental, indigenous, and social justice movements.

In particular, the field of “ecopsychology” has been forging such connections over the past two decades, which emphasizes the profound relation between the earth and human psyche and aims “to salvage the ‘more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it’ as the raw material of a new reality principle” (Roszak, 1995: 12). From an ecopsychological perspective, one promoted by more visionary voices within the psychedelic movement (e.g. Metzner, 2017), the modern reality/performance principle should be understood as a “permissible repression of cosmic empathy, a psychic numbing we have labeled ‘normal’”, rather than an adequate conception of “mental health” (Roszak, 1995: 11). Ecopsychology in this way provides the theoretical basis of an alternative vision of mental health that is needed to promote healing of both the human psyche and the earth, and the psychedelic movement could deepen its relation to ecopsychology by providing the psychopharmacological means to actualize its potential. In short, the contemporary environmental movement needs ecopsychology, and ecopsychology needs psychedelics, which are perhaps the most powerful tool at our disposal to catalyze ecologically restorative transformations of individual consciousness.

But rather than limiting itself to struggles within the field of psychotherapy, the psychedelic community should also make deeper connections to indigenous movements struggling for environmental justice. After all, indigenous communities are not only carriers and protectors of psychedelic plant-based knowledge but are also at the frontlines

of struggles against climate change, capitalist expansion, and predatory resource extraction (Lowy, 2014). At the same time, as Michael Lowy writes, there is a “deep antagonism between the culture, way of life, spirituality, and values of [indigenous] communities and the ‘spirit of capitalism’”, which makes them natural allies and teachers in the struggle for a new political-economy and more ecologically integrative reality principle (ibid: 14). Given its debt to indigenous communities and their shamanic traditions, the psychedelic community should reflect more deeply on how they can amplify their voices and struggles, while also envisioning how indigenous cosmologies, ecopsychology, and psychedelic pharmacology can help create the psychosocial basis of a more sustainable and just political-economic system.

Conclusion

These are complex issues that cannot be adequately addressed in the constraints of this essay, though I hope to at least contribute to a broader conversation about the role of the psychedelic movement in an era of planetary crisis. While multiple conflicting visions are both healthy and unavoidable, I believe a core aim of the psychedelic movement should be to contribute to the actualization of a new reality principle along with a new psychotherapeutic paradigm that foregrounds the sociological and ecological foundations of mental health. Overall, the goal would be to weaken the grip of the consumer capitalist reality/performance principle and catalyze a phase transition towards a more integrated, communally connected, and ecologically regenerative reality principle, one that could form the basis of a more sustainable and just political-economic system. This does not mean that psychedelics should be expected to bring about the herculean task of collective social transformation. Rather, a more modest and realistic role would be one of at least contributing to a process of collective grieving, healing, and reconnecting to the earth and the psychic riches of the unconscious. Perhaps then, whatever the course of ecological

crisis, new cultures may emerge that can survive and flourish on our rapidly changing planet.

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