

Marihuana and the New American Hedonism

John N. Bleibtreu

The link between capitalism and the puritan ethic may be responsible for the irrational opposition to a benign pleasure-giving weed.

There are no laws restricting the manufacture or distribution of erasers — the freedom to change one's mind is central to modern notions of individual liberty. One would think that mechanical devices which aid one in changing one's state of mind, from a state of depression to one of euphoria, from anxiety to tranquillity, from alienation and withdrawal to intimacy and involvement would be as welcome as the eraser — or better yet, as welcome as aspirin, which changes one's state of mind in relation to bodily discomfort.

Marijuana is just such an agent. It is the mildest of the psychedelics, it tends to open the mind to pleasurable sensations — sight, sound, taste, touch, and perhaps most importantly — sympathy. It tends to suppress expectation, one accepts without anticipation, touching sandpaper is as interesting and curiously satisfying a sensation as touching velvet. Culturally acquired judgements regarding sensation are somehow suspended, and the intrinsic, "natural" self approaches experience with an open susceptibility. Under the influence of marijuana, one becomes again as a child, restored to a state of primal innocence and delight. The essence of the weed is neither toxic (there is no hangover) nor addicting. Certain functions are impaired; the

space-time sense is distorted and such activities as driving a car may become dangerous, but the same is true of the state induced by alcohol. Alcohol however, is a true narcotic; it dulls the reflexes, thickens speech and tends to immunize one against sensation. Drunks do not feel cold or heat, or pleasure or pain. Like marijuana, alcohol tends to loosen inhibition, but there the resemblance ends.

Why therefore, should this benign and harmless intoxicant carry such a stigma in this country and be the focus of such ferocious and irrational opposition? It would seem from the severe statutory punishments that are awarded even for mere possession, that marijuana is somehow viewed by those entrusted with the maintenance of public order as a threat to this order, a threat to the welfare of the community or the state. The general sociological point of view holds that those who use marijuana do so out of rebellion, for negative reasons of self-injury rather than for the positive reasons of deriving delight in the exploration of the resources of the self. It seems more likely however, that the conspiratorial atmosphere which pervades the subculture of pot is only indirectly rebellious, a function of the severely punitive attitude which the general culture holds in relation to marijuana. The situation

is remotely analogous to that which prevailed during prohibition in relation to alcohol. Supplies can only be obtained through illegal, underground channels; there is always the danger of malicious informers. While enforcement of the marijuana laws is still more strict than was enforcement of the liquor laws during prohibition, it seems to be slackening somewhat and one can foresee that if these laws remain unchanged upon the books, they will come to be as dishonored in the observance and enforcement as were the liquor laws during prohibition.

By establishing as the basis of these laws, a set of patent untruths — that marijuana is a narcotic (which it is not), that it is physiologically addicting (which it is not), that it is damaging to health (which it may be — but only if used to considerable excess) and that it tends to produce aggressive reactions leading to crimes of violence (which it does not) — the state has put itself into an untenable position. As more and more people experiment with the drug, they are coming to discover that none of these claims made by the state is true. By continuing to maintain these lies against the personal experience of an ever-growing community of users, the state is behaving irrationally.

The opposition to any modification or liberalization of the marijuana laws is still so strong despite the scientific fallacies on which they are based that it seems appropriate to examine the nature of this radical opposition. The most likely reason for the popular association of marijuana with vice, evil and depravity, the reason that

first strikes the mind, is the puritan background which forms the historical setting for the American ethical stance. Historically, we Americans are suspicious of sensational pleasures. But in relation to the contemporary scene, this puritanism seems paradoxical, for there are very large and tremendously important sectors of the economy (the liquor industry, the entertainment industry, the recreation and travel industries) which pander to the exploitations of hedonism. If we are, as we seem to be, a pleasure seeking society, how can one understand the opposition to this relatively harmless intoxicant? Parachute jumping and automobile racing, in that they are violent sensation-producing activities, are intoxicating experiences. As such, they are a good deal more threatening to the personal safety of the participants, and to the safety of others than is marijuana smoking. Yet these activities are regulated with only a minimum of restrictions. Why the paradox?

I think that one can only comprehend the peculiar skewed logic which underlies the American ethical stance in relation to marijuana smoking by understanding the economic forces which tend to support and maintain an outdated set of biblical moral judgements. Generally in this secular nation, theological authority is becoming an ever-less potent force underlying the basis of legislation. But one can only begin to see the glimmerings of a logical pattern emerging from this snarl of contradictions if one examines the sources of this fear of marijuana from the viewpoint of Max Weber and Roger Tawney.

Though it is difficult to demonstrate a causal connection between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism, both movements were congenial to one another, and evolved simultaneously and symbiotically. There was nothing new in the idea of capitalism — of investing capital for gain; however the Catholic Church, which had been supporting a feudal society with a power base of landownership, had adopted a negative attitude toward investment. The Church condemned it, called it usury, and left it for non-Christians (Jews) to pursue. Calvin's great gift to capitalism was his theology which recognized the accumulation of wealth to be the reward of a sober, industrious, God-fearing life. This theology legitimized investment, restoring to the investor his self respect in relation to his commercial activities and in his relation to God.

Although one of the mainsprings of the Reformation as a movement was the cleansing and purification by "true" Christians of the "licentiousness" and "corruption" of the Church of Rome, the passage of time has shifted the position of the historical antagonists in this country. Today, in modern America, outmoded puritan laws are defended by Catholic power blocs. American Catholicism is dominated by the Irish as opposed to the Latin traditions of the Church. And there is a world of difference between the permissive Latin attitudes toward pleasure and sensation and the puritan Irish attitude. Irish liberals and Church reformers claim that Irish education was deeply influenced by the Jansenist heresy. French Jansenists fled from Port Royale

ahead of the French revolution and eventually found themselves installed by their British hosts (with great sagacity) as directors of the Irish school system. Jansen's moral positions regarding limited atonement and total depravity were far more severe than Calvin's. There exists a very high percentage of Irish Catholics involved in modern American law enforcement. Their moral stance in relation to pleasure, as it has been perpetuated by residual Jansenist influences in the American parochial school system, remains intractably harsh.

American materialism, though its roots remained tangled in the traditions of European protestantism, grew uniquely distinct in its new ecological setting. Karl Marx became the final apocalyptic prophet of European materialism, but his theses never found firm footing in America despite the waves of his articulate and talented disciples who arrived here in the wake of those abortive European Marxist revolutions of the late 19th Century.

America had produced its own materialist prophet some half a century previously — Eli Whitney. It was he, Whitney, who is generally credited with discovering the principle of "interchangeable parts" an idea which was to transform America and later the world.

Since we in America were far too busy meeting demands requiring activity to allow ourselves the passive pleasures of reflection, we never wholly realized that Eli Whitney's insight was not only a pragmatic device to speed the production

of machinery, but was, in addition, a philosophical conception of major magnitude. In the past 100 years, we have acted upon Whitney's doctrine as though it were a materialist manifesto. We have acted as though we believed that any material thing is capable of being interchanged with any other material thing. We interchange synthetic materials with natural materials paying minimum attention to the aesthetics of sensation. Though a formica countertop may look like natural wood, you know damn well as soon as you rest your bare arms on its cold and unforgiving surface that it is not wood. A few months ago the national attention was focussed on a man whose living beating heart had been replaced with a synthetic interchangeable one. Were it not that we have all been conditioned by Whitney's materialism, we would certainly have perceived this grotesque exchange to be an appalling insult to the very basis of human being. The man died subsequent to this operation, yet all the technologists cried out with one voice that his death was not due to his replacement heart. What then caused his death — an act of God?

This ruthless, blind materialism is causing the death of American cities and the despoilation of the countryside. A city is an evolving entity — an organism. An organism is not a machine; one cannot exchange the intrinsic parts of an organism with synthetic replacements without risking serious organic reactions. But we make corrective adjustments to our dying cities in accordance with Whitney's doctrines as though

they were machines, by replacing bits and pieces here and there with new (and by definition) better parts. It will not work.

The smoking of marijuana in America today is primarily an urban phenomenon. It is connected with the death of the American city and with the disenfranchisement of the city dweller. The escape into pleasure via marijuana is no longer only the preferred intoxication of the economically disenfranchised, the ghetto negro; it is rapidly becoming the preferred intoxicant of the psychically disenfranchised urban middle class.

Though Whitney's may have been the core idea which underlies the technological revolution, it was the genius of Henry Ford which elaborated this philosophical notion into the American Dream. Ford opened up to America and to the rest of the world, a materialist's vision of heaven. It was now possible to produce something for everybody at a price which almost everybody could afford. One could fill the collective desire for material things just as easily as one could fill a bucket with a hose. But intrinsic to mass production from the very beginning, was the threat that production might outpace demand. It might be like trying to fill that bucket with a firehose.

Demand had to be enlarged — and it was through new concepts of enabling consumers to acquire debt, through management leniency in labor negotiations in order that consumption might be encouraged through an apparent increase in earning power, and by other devices.

The most important element in the creation of an insatiable demand, however, was the enlargement of the appetite. This required a new hedonism — an entirely new definition of pleasure. Pleasure was equated now not with sensation, but with the possession of objects. And moreover, any real attachment in depth to the object was discouraged by the tenets of the New Hedonism for directly as an object be gained, the possessor must be induced to anticipate with pleasure, its subsequent discard and replacement. The superficial appearance of objects became the prime source of the new pleasure. Automobiles, for example, undergo regular and dramatic alterations to their body shells, yet the engine and suspension, the power train and chassis are not nearly so regularly and radically changed.

A brand new kind of concupiscent pornography was contrived by the advertising industry to enlarge this necessary demand for objects. The pornographer rejects attachments in depth. He is primarily a voyeur, fascinated by appearances; fascinated by the parts rather than the whole. There is pornography that concentrates on breasts, on pubes, buttocks, legs or whatnot. The essential nature of the whole is far less important than the appearance of any particular part. Because he cannot be satisfied, because his desire is allowed only a partial development, the pornographer is insatiable; he must expose himself continually to new titillations, a new gatefold girl each month, a new car, or wife, or house, or job, or a new set of friends.

The ephemeral discontinuities of satisfaction are encouraged by the economic and philosophical climate of the times, and it is precisely in contradiction to this set of values that the marijuana smoker pursues his form of intoxication for escape. No contemporary hedonist would dream of fondling his mistress' breast "till the conversion of the jews"; he would certainly hope, during that extended span of time, to have fondled quite a number of different breasts. No man adhering to conventionally accepted values would dream of buying a Rolls Royce with the express intention of driving it for 20 years. Because the New Hedonist cannot be satisfied, the search itself has become the new activity of pleasure.

It is just this point that the values of the marijuana smoker intersect. The state of marijuana intoxication emphasizes sensation rather than objects. Sensations are free. Walking naked in the rain, which is one hell of a sensation, does nothing to expand the Gross National Product, or to produce tax revenues for the state. The marijuana smoker watches a raindrop slide down the windowpane with awe and wonderment. He sees it as an epiphany of The Creation. He sees it with the same eye that William Blake cast upon his grain of sand. It is not at all merely an interchangeable part of the annual precipitation statistics. He sees the unity and interrelationship of it and him on a totally non-verbal level.

Since language has been the prime vehicle by which the New Hedonism has been promoted

(and one need only read the prose copy of the women's fashion magazines to see the debasing service to which lyric language has been put), language has become utterly corrupted. The most meaningful words in the language — LOVE, FREEDOM, GOD have been rendered the most meaningless. There is good evidence that these nouns, which refer to states of being, or experiences, are generally supposed to refer to objects. The cleft between the generations which seems to be ever widening is due in part to a misapprehension concerning the nature of love. It is not a service to be exchanged between parents and offspring. It is a state of mind — a feeling. Freedom is also a state of mind. One of the misapprehensions which dominates our foreign policy is that freedom is a commodity capable of being exported in the baggage of an army. GOD is also a state of being, or a state of mind. This is the whole point of the new radical God-is-dead theology which revolts against the idea that God is an object.

The marijuana smoker, especially in his stereotype as the hipster, deliberately restricts his vocabulary to the absolute minimum; to such a point that communication with him is impossible, except on his terms. He conducts communication not at the digital level of verbal language, but at the analog level of the eye-glance, facial expression, posture, tone of voice, etc. If the sensibilities of the observer are sharpened to such a pitch of perception as will perceive all the multitude of signals it displays, the body cannot lie as the mouth lies. Marijuana exacerbates

these sensibilities. It seems to do so by altering the time sense so that the connecting joint between anticipation and realization is broken. It is at this critical juncture that disappointment occurs. Since marijuana tends to disconnect logical thought sequences, there are no disappointments, only the delights of recognition.

Since the effect of the weed tends to disconnect conventional, culturally imprinted logical judgments, the marijuana smoker tends to approach others with patience, tact, and trust. The ecological niche in which most urban residents find themselves makes such character traits notably unadaptive. As Leo Durocher said, "Good guys finish last" — at least in cities. Good guys, manifesting patience, tact and trust would never enter into rush hour subways, never get onto an office elevator, never be able to drive across a busy pedestrian intersection, etc.

Urban middle class life, which is now producing the current crop of marijuana smokers, is obsessed with social role and rank. This is an outgrowth of the anonymous structure of the modern city. One often sees policemen in small rural towns dressed in ordinary clothes except for a badge pinned onto a sport shirt and an "official" cap. Such nonchalance of costuming would be intolerable in the city. The interdependent but highly specialized compartments of city living require that everyone who performs a social role must be immediately identifiable within that role, and his rank within this occupational hierarchy also be apparant. Waiters, garage attendants, mailmen must all wear recognizable

occupational costumes. When occupation is not distinguished by dress (it is hard to tell a lawyer from a stockbroker or a surgeon) occupational clues are given out immediately upon meeting. Everyone plays a specialized social role and it becomes terribly difficult to reveal the private self who lives within this social role in casual encounters. As most social encounters in the city are casual — which would be emotionally un-supportable unless there was a prescribed ritual of conduct — there is a much diminished circle of intimates in the city than generally prevails in the country.

Partly this is the case because the middle class urban resident conducts his social life as acquisitively as he does his economic life, the same hungry concupiscence for variety and novelty carries over. There is no time for cultivating those habits of attentive sensitivity which are required for the establishment of intimate relations. At an urban middle class cocktail party one thinks: "Will it be worth ten minutes of my time talking to this person — will she be "interesting" — or shall I be trapped with a dead head?" And no one wants to be trapped, for a replacement model even more "interesting" may be standing three yards away. These "interesting" qualities are perforce, entirely superficial. The object of the urban social game is to package oneself like a commodity so as to attract ever larger new markets.

For those animals whose offspring require a considerable period of post-natal care — and they include such disparate creatures as doves,

wolves, stickleback fish and human beings — natural selection has provided an emotional need for intimacy as a means of assuring the survival of the offspring, since the mating pair must cooperate in the rearing of the offspring until they are independent in their own right. Being associated with the sex drive, this drive for intimacy is equally strong, ancient, and functionally necessary.

Yet as the social habits of the urban middle class have lately evolved in response to the physical structure of the city and its economic pressures, the habits of intimacy have begun to atrophy. As we come to assume our social roles, in order for us to maintain them with credibility, we must pretend to assume the role's inbuilt attitudes towards issues and events. While this adjunct to role-playing simplifies the work of the pollster, it transforms social interaction into improvised theater. Being continually "on stage" all the time leads the individual into a forbidding alienation from himself, from his own unique perception of the world around him and its happenings.

For example, if a middle class protestant couple were to move from a suburban housing development attached to a large Eastern university to an identical development attached to a government operated missile site in the Southwest, there would be a subtle but complete metamorphosis of their public presentations of themselves — at cocktail parties and PTA meetings and so on. But this public presentation cannot stop as they close the door of their house upon themselves.

There would also be a subtle but complete metamorphosis of their intimate personal relationships with one another, their children and themselves.

This continual assumption of a role leads to that isolation, loneliness and alienation which have become the hallmarks of modern urban life. It was Humphry Osmond who once stated with great prescience that while alcohol tends to promote feelings of social conviviality, marijuana tends to promote feelings of social intimacy. Since the stereotypes of social role are imprinted upon the intellect, and the effect of marijuana intoxication is to impede the functioning of the intellect in making social judgements, marijuana makes it possible to penetrate the masquerade and contact the uniqueness of the individual huddled within the disguise of the role.

To some extent, this is also true of alcohol intoxication which also reduces the role of the intellect in behavior. But alcohol also suppresses the capacity to comprehend sensation. All the sense receptors must be tuned to their finest pitch in order for real, meaningful communication to cross between two or more people. Alcohol tends to muffle and obscure perception of those delicately subtle elements of communication which are the most important. Because it admits precisely those subtleties into the consciousness,

One must learn to protect oneself against the tigers to which one has given birth, as well as against those begotten by others.

(Tibetan Proverb)

marijuana appears to serve as a more effective means of escape from that insupportable sense of being alone. I think that judging from the marked rise in marijuana use by the urban middle class young, particularly in colleges and universities, in the last several years, one can legitimately predict that its use as a social intoxicant by the harried urban middle class will increase in the future rather than decrease.

When one considers that by 1970 half of the American electorate will be less than 35 years of age, and that an ever increasing proportion of this population will be residing in the cities and their associated suburbs, I think one can predict that both the moral and statutory opposition to marijuana smoking will slacken. But I think we should make every effort to change the law so that it conforms to custom, for laws that remain on the books unobserved and un-enforced undermine the general consensus by which the rule of law is maintained. The Cannabis sativa plant and its effects should be studied neutrally and objectively as intensively as tobacco or alcohol. Reasonable regulations should be contrived to minimize its malign effects on those who are physiologically or psychologically allergic to it, while at the same time permitting its general use as a benign social lubricant.