

Consciousness Expansion and Counterculture in the 1960s and Beyond



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A dramatic expansion of our collective worldview occurred in the early sixties, when astronauts and cosmonauts were launched into space on Earth-orbiting satellites, and brought back the first dramatic photographs of the whole Earth from space. Emblematic of the aspirations for space exploration, the television series *Star Trek*, with an alien as one of the main characters, began airing on NBC, and became a cult classic in American science fiction. In 1969 Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the Moon. As explained by astrologer-scholar Rick Tarnas in his book *Cosmos and Psyche*, close conjunctions and alignments of the planetary archetypes Uranus, Pluto and Saturn characterized the revolutionary, liberating and creative energies of this decade. The boost in the exploration of outer space was accompanied by a parallel surge in the exploration of psychic or inner space.

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As far as I know, the concept of consciousness expansion was first used by Tim Leary and his associates at Harvard, to describe the effects of drugs like psilocybin and LSD, which were also later termed *psychedelic* (“mind-manifesting”). In a 1961 letter to Leary from Albert Hofmann, the discoverer of LSD expressed his appreciation to Leary for the concept of consciousness expansion, stating that he had been urging Aldous Huxley and others, that while the applications of LSD in psychiatry and pharmacotherapy were important, there were wider implications of these experiences for the enhancement of creativity and deeper understanding of the further reaches of the human mind. In this regard, Hofmann was far more open-minded than Huxley, R. Gordon Wasson and most psychiatrists, who tended to believe strongly that these drugs could only be used safely by psychiatric patients under medical supervision, or at best by elite intellectuals. Tim Leary’s approach was radically different, though it was not, as some believed, opposed to psychiatric research being done with psychedelics.

Leary and his associates began their research with psilocybin at Harvard University in the early 1960s, carrying out studies with “normal” people in supportive, naturalistic settings that were neither clinics nor laboratories. Participants in these studies could clearly confirm that these substances, although called hallucinogenic by some, did not induce hallucinations in the sense of seeing illusions of things objects that weren’t “really there.” Rather, they seemed to affect the actual psychophysiology of perception in such a way that one would see everything that was there, as ordinarily, and in addition much more: vibrating fields of subtle energies, or associated thought-forms and patterns that related to one’s personal history, or our relationships with other beings, human and non-human in the world around us.

The process of consciousness expansion induced (with the appropriately favorable set and setting) by these drugs, was in some ways analogous to the process of awakening: when we awaken from sleep, our perceptual world opens up and we emerge from the closed cocoon-like state of dream and sleep to become aware of our body, the bed we’re in, our sleep companion, the room, perhaps the garden outside the window, the greater world beyond – potentially all the way to the infinite cosmos. As we do, our sense of identity changes, we may remember the more limited dream world we had been in, and find that we have a greatly enhanced freedom of choice – freedom to think and see differently, to move and do things hitherto impossible.

Later studies with LSD or peyote in the treatment of alcoholism, or ibogaine or ayahuasca in the treatment of cocaine addiction, were based on the finding that experiences of expanded consciousness could be, depending on set and setting, associated with insight into one’s own character and deeper needs, and therefore lead to more healthy and positive choices. Addictions and compulsions, whether consumptive (drugs, alcohol, food) or behavioral (sex, gambling, shopping) can be understood as involving contracted states of consciousness, where attention and awareness is fixated on repetitively and ritualistically taking in

something or doing something. The treatment of addictions and compulsions with psychedelic, consciousness-expanding drugs was (and is again now) one of the most promising applications of these substances in health care.

One of the studies carried out as part of the Harvard research, involved the “experimental mysticism” study of Walter Pahnke, in which theology students took psilocybin in a religious setting, and reported a high proportion of classic mystical experiences. This study of religious-mystical experience induced by psilocybin has recently been replicated in research by Roland Griffiths at Johns Hopkins University. Mystical experiences involve a complete transcendence of the usual boundaries of time, space and the physical body and a sense of oneness with the divine and the cosmos – representing the ultimate expansion of consciousness. In my view, a second major application of psychedelics in the future is likely to be in the psychological preparation of people for dying, enlarging their awareness and sense of identity beyond the confines of the body and personal ego-mind. [*Publisher’s Note: To learn more about current research of this type visit: www.maps.org*]

Through the discoveries of R. Gordon Wasson and others in Mexico, and Michael Harner and others in South America, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, the psychological and medical researchers who first applied LSD and other consciousness expanding drugs in Western laboratories and psychiatric clinics, found themselves unexpectedly connected to ancient lineages of mystical, spiritual and shamanic teachings and practices. Both the shamanistic and the Asian yogic traditions are based on worldviews vastly expanded in comparison to the standard materialistic paradigm accepted in the West. In these worldviews there is a recognition of many levels of reality, many dimensions of being, equal in reality to the time-space-matter dimension, which is the only one recognized as real in Western science. Furthermore, these Asian and indigenous traditions also recognize the reality of beings, called “spirits” or “deities,” existing in these multiple dimensions, that have their own independent, autonomous existence, and

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Thus, the discovery of consciousness-expanding drugs in the West and the re-discovery of the role of consciousness-expanding plants and fungi in shamanistic societies, along with other modalities of exploring consciousness such as the shamanic drumming journey and yogic meditation practices, led to significant expansions of the Western materialist scientific worldview – at least in the thinking and writing of many individuals, if not the academic establishment and mainstream media.

It is possible to apply the consciousness expansion of concept to the forms and patterns of collective consciousness: to mass-mind images and memes, to scientific paradigms and worldviews, to the ideologies of spiritual practice and religious devotion. In my book *The Expansion of Consciousness* (2008), I pointed out that the decade of the 1960s was a time of several interconnected movements of socio-cultural transformation that profoundly changed Western society, and more indirectly other countries in the world as well: the environmental movement, the women's liberation movement, the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, the revolution in sexual and family relations and an explosion of new forms of expression in music and the visual arts. Even though there is no evidence of a direct causative connection between ingestion of psychedelics and these socio-cultural transformation movements, each of them represents an expansion of collective consciousness, a transcending of existing limited conventions, attitudes and norms, similar to what is classically associated with psychedelic experiences in the individual.

The historian Theodore Roszak, in his very influential 1968 book *The Making of a Counterculture*, identified and described these transformation movements as constituting a kind of quasi-revolutionary culture in opposition to the mainstream. Although these social movements were countercultural or even, at times, revolutionary, in that they challenged unjust, limiting or outmoded attitudes and practices of the dominant social order, it is

important to recognize that being against something was not the primary intention behind these movements.

In an infant's struggle to be born, ultimately into a larger world and way of being, there may be a phase of intense and sometimes violent opposition to the limitations of the existing order (represented by the mother's body). This kind of opposition, which may even threaten the mother's life, is not however the ultimate aim of the neonate's struggle – which is rather to emerge from a condition that has become intolerable, too limiting, into an expanded world of greater freedom and possibilities for growth. Let us look at these movements, which continue in various ways to this day, through the dual lens of counterculture and expanding consciousness.

Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, raised awareness of environmental despoliation and is generally considered the beginning impetus for the American environmental movement, and for major conservation and preservation organizations and policies that persist to this day. The very title *Silent Spring* refers to an experience of expanded consciousness: if we do not hear the singing birds we are accustomed to hear, we naturally ask – why not? This question in turn leads us to investigate environmentally destructive processes caused by human technology – which we then engage as activists to ameliorate, for the health and wellbeing of humans and the integrity of the ecosystems which we inhabit along with other animal and plant species of life.

This process is analogous to the kind of therapeutic “course-correction vision” that drug addicts and alcoholics often report when relating their experience with plant-based entheogens such as peyote or ayahuasca: under the influence of these botanical sacraments, a person may report becoming clearly aware of hitherto hidden patterns of thought and behavior that are leading them in a self-destructive direction – and therefore feel empowered to make health preserving new choices. I have published several accounts of this kind of healing vision in my edited volumes on the sacred mushroom and

on ayahuasca. Also in these books are accounts by individuals who in the early 1960s were powerfully affected by their psychedelic experiences and became committed environmental activists for the rest of their lives (including myself).

Many individuals and groups integrated their expanded conscious visions for a food supply free of chemical additives and pesticides into the development of the organic food movement, which in the ensuing decades emerged as a wide-spread and viable alternative to industrial factory farming. Similarly, the recognition of the industrial pollution of the atmosphere and water supply was channeled into political advocacy for clean air and water preservation. Thus, we see that the environmental movement counters and critiques the destructive and polluting effects of industrial corporations and seeks to preserve and enhance the integrity of both wilderness and built environments.

The women's liberation movement critiques and counters the sexist discrimination of deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes and institutions and seeks to establish equality in work and pay and to protect the rights of women to make their own choices in the areas of sexuality and child-bearing. The 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* launched the women's liberation movement, with its "consciousness-raising" groups, in which women-only groups met in council to discuss issues of identity and relationship. Questioning themselves and each other—who am I, besides being someone's wife, daughter, sister, lover, secretary? And such consciousness expanding questions would naturally lead to making new and healthier choices in life-style, work and creative expression.

The anti-war movement countered the American war-machine, with all the formidable power and resources that it disposes—and this opposition could and did result in flare-ups of public violence between state authorities and counter-cultural rebels and dissidents. But the underlying intention and vision of the anti-war movement is to be oppositional only temporarily, and then to further the peaceful unfolding of the civilization's

potentials in all their diversity.

Similarly, the civil rights movement countered racist discrimination practices, the legacies of slavery, principally in schools and housing. But its ultimate intention vision, as in Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech (1963), was to see a society in which black children and white children, and those of other races, could go to school together in freedom and peace. In the 19th century, waging war against the slave-holding South was not the ultimate intention of the abolitionist movement-- rather it was the emancipation of slaves.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" was one of the Reverend King's memorable inspired sayings. And it is probably because of King's unshakable commitment to the practice and advocacy of non-violence that the counter-cultural impulse in the civil rights and anti-war movements did not lead to more violence than it did. Even so, the repressive forces of the established power-elites, who saw their positions and wealth threatened by the counterculture, exacted a heavy toll: the assassination of four dynamic and popular leaders--the Kennedy brothers, and M.L. King and Malcolm X. Interestingly, at the present time of 2009 and beyond, American society again will examine the atavistic residues of slavery and racial discrimination under the presidential leadership of a younger, and multi-cultural African-American.

The movement for increased freedom of sexual expression, supported also by the women's movement, by the invention of the contraceptive pill, and by the books of zoologist Alfred Kinsey on human sexual behavior (1943, 1953), countered and critiqued many unexamined and prejudicial religion-bound conventions of marriage and family; but ultimately aimed for wholesome, non-patriarchal alternatives to the so-called "nuclear household." There was a wave of communitarian experimentation, as has happened periodically in American history. Intentional communities sprang up, such as the one Leary, Alpert and myself participated in for a few years at Millbrook, New York, experimenting with new forms of extended family relations,

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sexuality and child-rearing. A conversational memoir by Ram Dass and myself of the Harvard and Millbrook years is forthcoming under the title *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture* (Synergetic Press, 2009).

The vision motivating the counterculture of the 1960s was pioneering innovation, reform and liberation, based on an expanded awareness of the needs of the whole society (as in the civil rights, women's liberation and sexual revolution), of all of humanity (as in the peace movement) and the regional ecosystem and biosphere (as in the ecology movement). The innovative and pioneering aspects of these socio-cultural transformations are particularly obvious in the breakthroughs that occurred from new discoveries in the sciences, and new forms of celebratory expressions in the arts. Here we don't necessarily see opposition to an existing order, but simply a highly energized, innovative and creative "moving beyond" into an expanded worldview.

On the other hand, the countercultural and revolutionary elements in these movements, especially in the political and economic sphere tends to produce violent backlash and repression by the dominant culture, as "the empire strikes back." This in turn leads to intensification of the rebellious oppositional forces, bringing about an escalation of violence and destruction – all tendencies that we can see being played out in subsequent decades, to the present day.

Undoubtedly, an energizing and amplifying influence in the growth of the expanding consciousness culture during the 1960s was the widespread availability of inexpensive psychedelic drugs, as well as cultivated mushrooms, for personal use by increasingly large numbers of people. This certainly amplified the innovation and creativity in the arts and sciences and added much larger numbers of spiritually committed individuals to what before were relatively small minority movements. Whether psychedelics also amplified the rebelliousness and confrontational resistance movements of the 1960s, is impossible to say. Some would argue that the greater physical violence

of the revolutionary movements was more connected to amphetamine use.

Going beyond the political and economic changes brought by the countercultural movements of expanded consciousness, our global human civilization may be involved in change processes at the level of planetary evolution. Processes of desertification, deforestation and the destruction of habitats have plunged planet Earth into what has been called a "sixth extinction." At the same time, industrial civilization's addiction to carbon fuels as energy source has brought the biosphere to the brink of catastrophic collapse through global over-heating.

Many individuals who have worked in a respectful and spiritual way with plant and fungal teachers, as well as working shamanically with animal spirit guides, have reported increasing communication from the spiritual realms of Nature in response to their divinatory questioning. Their messages and visions have to do, as one might expect, with practices that reduce our adverse impact on ecosystems, with the preservation of wilderness and the essential diversity of life, and with the development of sustainable, bioregional economies and communities.

There may be a profound and mysterious shift occurring in the balance of life on this planet. The dominant and dominating role of the human in relation to the natural world has brought about unparalleled ecological disaster, degradation of habitats and loss of species. Could it be that the profound consciousness-raising and compassion-deepening effects of the visionary plant brews and tinctures are signaling an evolutionary initiative coming from other, non-human, intelligences on this planet? Instead of the usual attitude of arrogant and exploitative superiority, those who have experienced mushrooms, peyote, ayahuasca and other entheogens are more likely to find themselves humbled and awed by the mysterious powers of nature, and strive to live in a simpler way that minimizes environmental harm and protects and celebrates the astonishing diversity and beauty of life. •