

LSD and the American Counterculture: Comrades in the Psychedelic Quest

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LSD shaped the American counterculture in its own image. The powerful drug strongly influenced countercultural ideas, symbols, fashions, and music. ‘Dropping acid’ was a rite of passage into the counterculture that helped to separate it from mainstream society. Psychedelic experiences also encouraged users to question and rethink social mores and fostered a sense of community within the movement. Some historians contend that acid and other drugs killed the counterculture, but I argue that LSD played only a minor role in the movement’s decline.

Introduction

Have you ‘turned on’? *Are You Experienced?* Have you passed the Acid Test? Within the American counterculture, these three questions all drove at the same inquiry: Have you tried LSD yet? Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann first discovered the psychedelic effects of LSD (Lysergic acid diethylamide, or simply ‘acid’) in 1943 [Gahlinger, 2004]. By 1969, millions of young Americans had taken it [Lee and Shlain, 1992]. This article will argue that LSD was a key factor in the formation of the counterculture in 1960s America, and that it continued to shape and change the movement throughout the decade. Countercultural ideas, symbols, fashions, and music were all greatly influenced by the drug. Acid also helped to distinguish the counterculture from mainstream society, and promoted a sense of community within the movement. LSD’s ability to warp the user’s reality encouraged the questioning and rethinking of social norms. Finally, contrary to popular perception, LSD played only a small role in the counterculture’s decline.

In making the above argument, this article provides a review and synthesis of existing research on LSD and the American counterculture and presents it with an original perspective informed by my own additional primary research. I have consulted a multitude of first-hand accounts of life in the American counterculture, including ‘trip reports’ detailing LSD experiences. A range of contemporary popular culture sources have also proven useful. These include novels and journalism, visual sources and album art, and music recordings, which I have interrogated in light of the existing historiography.

The 1960s ‘counterculture’ is notoriously difficult to define. ‘There are as many definitions of the term counterculture’, say Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, ‘as there were utopian fantasies during the actual counterculture’ [Braunstein and Doyle, 2002]. According to the most restrictive definition, the counterculture includes only those who completely ‘dropped out’ of straight society, abandoning their homes, studies and careers [Braunstein and Doyle, 2002]. However, most

historians also include the ‘part-timers’ who enjoyed elements of the counterculture’s fashion, music, ideas, and lifestyle without completely leaving mainstream society [Sayre, 1996].

While the commitment-level and beliefs of its members varied greatly, the counterculture was essentially a cultural youth movement that questioned and rejected many of America’s established values and beliefs [Braunstein and Doyle, 2002]. At the core of the movement was individual freedom. Jentri Anders remembers the ‘freedom to explore one’s potential, freedom to create one’s Self, freedom of personal expression, freedom from scheduling, freedom from rigidly defined roles and hierarchical statuses’ that she enjoyed whilst living in a countercultural commune [Anders, 1990]. With its epicentre in the Haight-Ashbury area of San Francisco, countercultural ideas spread rapidly throughout the United States [Echols, 2002].

The Psychedelic Experience

By the 1960s, drug use and abuse was prevalent throughout the United States. Over-consumption of alcohol was commonplace, and 80 per cent of men smoked cigarettes [Braunstein and Doyle, 2002]. In 1965, doctors wrote 123 million prescriptions for benzodiazepines such as Valium, and 24 million for amphetamines [Stevens, 1987]. These drugs were highly addictive and deadly, yet they were legal and socially acceptable. LSD was also legal until 1966. If it had been just another drug that made people euphoric or numbed their anxiety, its social impact would have been minimal. Understanding the peculiar *psychedelic* effects that LSD (and its rarer cousins such as mescaline and psilocybin) has on the human mind is therefore crucial to understanding its social and cultural impact.

Unfortunately, many historians have stumbled at this first hurdle. By dismissing LSD use as simply ‘getting high’, historians such as Arthur Marwick fail to explain why LSD had such a huge cultural impact while other, stronger euphoricants such as cocaine did not [Marwick, 1998]. In his book *The Sixties*, Terry Anderson is equally mistaken when he writes that LSD was a ‘device used for coping’ with a

‘society that increasingly rejects humanitarian values’ [Anderson, 2007]. LSD, in other words, dulled the pain of being young in 1960s America. However, anyone who took LSD to get through a tough time in their lives or numb their depression was in for a rude shock. Alice Echols is closer to the mark when she argues that LSD was not simply about feeling good: ‘some trips were bad, but mostly spiritually cathartic, even transcendent’ [Echols, 2002]. For Echols, the emotional and spiritual intensity of the LSD experience was an ‘antidote to the adventure shortage’ that many young people felt growing up in post-war America [Echols, 2002].

So what, then, is it like to ‘trip’ on LSD? Gerard DeGroot puts it well when he says that ‘LSD acts by temporarily dismissing the sentries guarding the gates of consciousness’, the ‘unprotected brain is invaded by a mob of unprocessed stimuli on which it is unable to impose logic’ [DeGroot, 2008]. For six to twelve hours, LSD transforms the tripper’s world into a very different and often indescribably surreal place. This can bring anything from ecstatic wonder to nightmarish terror, depending on the user’s mindset and setting [Gahlinger, 2004]. Colours appear brighter, small details become more noticeable, and intricate patterns overlay surfaces. The world warps and melts and objects morph into one another [Gahlinger, 2004]. Bruce Hoffman was part of the initial wave of university students who sampled the LSD distributed by Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary. He recalls that on LSD ‘really some remarkable perceptual changes take place’, at times ‘you’d have the floor dissolve beneath you, the walls would be acting more like jello than masonry’ [Hoffman, 2001]. Feelings of deep connection with nature, the universe, and other people are commonplace. Jane DeGennaro remembers experiencing ‘religious ecstasy’ on her first trip in 1967, the year that she graduated from high school: ‘I was absolutely, completely 100 percent satisfied. I cannot express how fulfilled I was, how absolutely, totally happy’ [DeGennaro, 2001].

Psychedelic Symbolology

LSD’s most obvious impact on the counterculture was its influence on the symbols and fashions of the movement. Reflecting the effects of LSD, the symbols and fashions of the counterculture were brightly coloured, intricately patterned, and deliberately strange. Psychedelic text, which increasingly appeared on everything from posters to shop-fronts, had a warped and melted appearance [University of Virginia Library, 1998]. Swirling patterns in brightly coloured tie-dyed clothing recalled LSD’s kaleidoscopic closed-eye visuals.

At the forefront of the counterculture, author Ken Kesey (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*)

and his acid-fuelled friends, the ‘Merry Pranksters’, travelled the country in a multi-coloured Harvester bus. Painted on the front of the bus was its destination: ‘Furthur’ [*sic*]. On the back, its contents: ‘Caution: Weird Load’. The Pranksters and their followers deliberately dressed and acted as strangely as possible in an attempt to ‘blow the minds’ of ‘straight America’ [Stephens, 1998]. At one of the Pranksters’ early ‘Acid Tests’, journalist Tom Wolfe recorded ‘A ballroom surrealistically seething with a couple of thousand bodies stoned out of their everloving bruces in crazy costumes and obscene makeup’ [Wolfe, 1968]. Posters advertising the ‘Acid Tests’ featured a bewildering combination of ‘oriental deities, Victorian cartoon characters, Indian sadhus, engravings from Greek statues and cowboys from American Westerns’ [Stephens, 1998].

LSD users’ desire to reflect the strangeness of their drug-induced state through bizarre fashion and behaviour spread quickly. Bruce Hoffman recalls that at New York’s 1967 Great Easter Be-In ‘everyone was stoned out of their minds on grass or mescaline or acid or all of the above’ and dressed in ‘outrageous costumes, Day-Glo paints on the skin, people handing out daffodils to policemen and businessmen’ [Hoffman, 2001]. At a 1967 peace march in Washington DC, Norman Mailer observed ‘buckskins, top hats, ponchos, army surplus jackets, turbans, capes, even an unhorsed knight who stalked about in the weight of real armour’ [Bromell, 2000].

There is a historical consensus that rock music was central to the counterculture [Farber, 1994]. But many historians refuse to acknowledge the huge impact that drugs, and particularly LSD, had on 1960s rock. Brick’s 228 page book *The Age of Contradictions* focuses on rock music and the counterculture in great depth but features zero references to ‘LSD’, and just two passing references to ‘psychedelics’ [Brick, 1998]. Dickstein’s *Gates of Eden*, meanwhile, celebrates ground-breaking albums such as Jefferson Airplane’s *Surrealistic Pillow*, and The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* without discussing drugs at all [Dickstein, 1989].

The lyrics of counterculture musicians such as Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane and The Beatles are full of thinly (if at all) veiled references to LSD. Hendrix’s debut album title asked *Are You Experienced?*, and the album cover’s warped photograph, yellow and purple colouring, and psychedelic text made it obvious what he was talking about [University of Virginia Library, 1998]. In their hit song *White Rabbit*, Jefferson Airplane famously advised their listeners to ‘remember what the dormouse said’ and ‘feed your head’ [Jefferson Airplane, 1967]. The Beatles, meanwhile, sang of ‘tangerine trees’, ‘marmalade skies’ and ‘Lucy in the

Sky with Diamonds' (LSD) [The Beatles, 1967].

In addition to the lyrics, LSD also greatly influenced the sound and format of sixties rock. Artists used electronics to create strange, drawn-out, warping sounds that reflected the effects of LSD [Lytle, 2006]. The echoed, rising crescendo of Jefferson Airplane's *White Rabbit*, for example, was designed to mirror psychedelic sensory distortions [Bromell, 2000]. The depth of the psychedelic experience inspired artists to create increasingly layered and complex music. While The Beatles' first album took less than 10 hours to record, *Sgt. Pepper's* took over 700 [Lytle, 2006]. Standard 3-minute songs were ill suited to the long, flowing LSD experience. Instead, psychedelic rock bands such as the Grateful Dead played 30-minute songs that flowed smoothly into one another [Lytle, 2006].

'Acid rock' groups were also quick to embrace the electric guitar. 'Plugging in' to electrics mirrored the 'monumental stimulus' and 'high voltage charge' provided by psychedelics [Echols, 2002]. Grateful Dead guitarist Phil Lesch recalled that 'you can hear it all. That's what electronics do—they amplify the overtones to a degree never thought possible in an acoustic instrument' [Echols, 2002]. In 1965, San Francisco rock critic Richard Goldstein wrote that 'with safety in numbers, the drug and rock 'n' roll undergrounds swim up the same stream. The psychedelic ethic—still germinating and still unspoken—runs through the musical mainstream in a still current' [Goldstein, 1995].

Countercultural Questioning

By the late 1960s, the divide between establishment culture and counterculture was becoming increasingly stark. In 1967, the Gray Line Bus Company began 'Hippy Hop Tours' of Haight-Ashbury. Mainstream Americans were encouraged to take the 'only foreign tour within the continental limits of the United States' [Echols, 2002]. DeGroot argues that drugs 'divided the world into hips and squares, with unbelievers ostracised. Like heathens judged by a peculiarly bigoted religion, those who did not indulge were cast from the kingdom' [Echols, 2002]. DeGroot's comparisons with a 'bigoted religion' are extreme. But he is correct that drugs, and particularly LSD, played a crucial role in dividing counterculture ('hips') from mainstream culture ('squares').

From the mid-1960s, having your mind 'blown' by acid served as a rite of passage into the counterculture [Lytle, 2006]. In 1972, psychiatrist Ross Speck wrote that experience with LSD 'is a card of identity that unites the culture of youth perhaps as strongly as blue jeans or bell-bottoms' [Speck et al., 1972]. Bruce Hoffman recalls that 'in the madness of those years, we really thought that

we were the chosen, the ones to lead everyone to the truth. Our egos were having free reign, and we basically had a very simplistic vision: the straights vs. those who knew—comrades in the psychedelic quest' [Hoffman, 2001]. The criminalisation of LSD in California in 1966 further emphasised the divide between 'heads' and 'straights' [Anderson, 2007]. Simply taking LSD became a rebellious act that signalled the user's rejection of mainstream American society and its laws [Lee and Shlain, 1992]. Collective acid experiences at concerts and parties also helped to foster a sense of community within the counterculture [Braunstein and Doyle, 2002]. One user realised that 'on acid you can jump those boundaries without intruding. You can enter someone else's sphere, and they can enter yours' [Bromell, 2000].

By 1972, one third of Americans under 25 considered marriage obsolete, half held no living American in high regard, and 40 percent considered America a 'sick society' [Anderson, 2007]. The youth of the 1960s had clearly partaken in a widespread and dramatic questioning of their parents' beliefs. Many historians have argued that drugs such as LSD had a mentally limiting effect on members of the counterculture. DeGroot, for example, writes that 'for most people who sought rebellion through drugs, the crusade went no further than their own heads. Taking LSD was a selfish act which allowed escape from reality' [DeGroot, 2008]. But some historians such as Nick Bromell have correctly recognised that the 'insight into the world's instability provided by pot, acid and rock had political consequences.' 'After getting high or tripping, 60s users realised that their belief in a core self was naïve, that their faith in stability was foolish, and so they were fully prepared to see through everything', he argues [Bromell, 2000]. In other words, the reality-altering effects of LSD helped to foster the questioning of established 'truth', 'reality' and social mores, which was a defining feature of the counterculture.

Harvard psychologist and acid guru Timothy Leary believed that the questioning of social norms that LSD inspired had the power to transform society. This was because LSD rearranged the 'imprinting process' in the human mind and allowed people to rethink things they had previously taken for granted [Stevens, 1987]. Ken Kesey, who described his early trips as 'shell shattering ordeals', similarly believed in the transformative power of acid: 'the purpose of psychedelics is to learn the conditioned responses of people and then to prank them. That's the only way to get people to ask questions, and until they ask questions they're going to remain conditioned robots' [Lytle, 2006]. Years later, Kesey elaborated: 'LSD lets you in on something. When you're tripping, the idea of race

disappears; the idea of sex disappears; you don't even know what species you are sometimes. And I don't know of anybody who hasn't come back from that being more humane, more thoughtful, more understanding' [Lee and Shlain, 1992]. Dissident poet Allen Ginsberg agreed, saying 'technology has produced a chemical which catalyses a consciousness which finds the entire civilisation leading up to that pill absurd' [Stevens, 1987]. In his 1972 study of communes, psychiatrist Ross Speck praised psychedelics as 'a sacrament, a religious and aesthetic expansion and renewal' that allowed 'a rapid restructuring of human social values, capable of saving mankind' [Speck et al., 1972].

LSD inspired many youths that they could escape the establishment's 'reality'. That they could 'drop out' of a sick American society and create their own collective experience at concerts, on campus, and in communes. After taking LSD, Anne Waldman realised that 'the darkness was someone else's evil version of reality, not reality itself. Nothing was that solid or insurmountable. We were changed forever because we were experiencing these inspiring truths' [Waldman, 2000]. For John Barlow, LSD made it 'obvious to me that all of the separateness ordinarily perceived was, in fact, an artefact of cultural conditioning, and was less real than what I was supposedly hallucinating' [Barlow, 2000]. Some trippers found the social norms of the world that they returned to stranger than the warped world of acid. Bruce Hofmann recalls that after his first trip 'when you reappeared on campus, you felt like you had re-entered the historical past that was still alive' [Hoffman, 2001].

Not surprisingly, the 'establishment' was less than thrilled by this widespread, 'drug-induced' questioning of beliefs and traditions [Stevens, 1987]. At the 1966 Congressional hearings into LSD, psychiatrist Stanley Cohen testified that 'we have seen something which is most alarming, more alarming than death in a way. And that is the loss of cultural values, the loss of feeling of right and wrong, good and bad. These people lead a valueless life, without motivation, without ambition . . . they are decultured, lost to society, lost to themselves' [Braunstein and Doyle, 2002]. In 1967, a government official deemed the 'anti-social' effects of LSD 'the greatest threat facing the country today' [Lee and Shlain, 1992].

Bad Trip: The Decline of the Counterculture

Hunter S. Thompson's classic 1972 novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* opens as Raoul Duke and his attorney set off for Las Vegas. Armed with a suitcase full of LSD and other drugs, they are in search of the 'American Dream'. *Fear and Loathing* provides a satirical critique of the ugliness and hypocrisy

of sixties-era American culture. But the novel also takes aim at LSD's destructive impact on the counterculture. Thompson criticises Timothy Leary who 'crashed around America selling consciousness expansion without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying in wait for all the people who took him too seriously' [Thompson, 1972]. LSD had taken 'all those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit' and turned them into 'a generation of permanent cripples, failed seekers' [Thompson, 1972].

Many historians have similarly argued that the counterculture was destroyed through excess, particularly in relation to drugs. Marwick writes that 'the LSD phase passed, and few in later decades believed the rubbish about the beneficial, mind-expanding qualities of drugs . . . if I am to praise 1960s society for some of its legacies, I must surely condemn it for being the society in which drug abuse began to run out of control' [Marwick, 1998]. 'Certainly drugs cut a big swathe through the counterculture and the world of sixties rock', argues Echols, 'everyone knows the big names—Hendrix, Joplin, Morrison—but there were so many more losses' [Echols, 2002].

Drugs did indeed destroy many lives in the counterculture. LSD has received much of the blame, but this is largely unfounded. Alcohol and prescription barbiturates killed Hendrix, and Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison both overdosed on heroin [Braunstein and Doyle, 2002]. The lethal dose of LSD is around 1200 standard doses [Gahlinger, 2004]. A recreational user would therefore need access to production-level quantities to have any chance of overdosing. Physically, LSD is non-toxic and non-addictive, and high-level, short-term tolerance makes daily use unlikely [Gahlinger, 2004]. The intensity of the acid voyage means that most people desire a substantial break before re-embarking. In the words of one sixties user, getting addicted to LSD would be like 'being addicted to having the shit beat out of you' [Echols, 2002]. Yet people did die on LSD. Users' disconnection from reality could cause accidents, typified by the stories of trippers jumping out of windows. But LSD's chief dangers were psychological, frequently causing or exacerbating mental illness [Stevens, 1987].

Critics also argue that LSD was a 'gateway' substance that led to the abuse of more destructive drugs [Lee and Shlain, 1992]. Some drug-users did indeed progress (or regress) from acid to heroin and methamphetamine. Bruce Hoffman was horrified to learn that his trip-guide from his maiden LSD experience was 'experimenting with heroin and shooting up speed . . . He was one of the first clues I had that something was going wrong, because

at the time I still had a rather utopian ideal of what psychedelics could bring about in our culture' [Hoffman, 2001]. Dealers pushed the addictive drugs. Unlike acid which was more casually used and often given away, there was serious money to be made in addictive substances [DeGroot, 2008]. For this reason, the radical activist San Francisco Diggers were highly critical of the illegal drug trade and encouraged people to 'Make It—Grow It—Give It—Share It' [Sayre, 1996]. Scholars still debate the 'gateway theory' of drug abuse today [Tarter et al., 2006]. But it seems fair to conclude that for many users, LSD's psychoactive effects, and resulting contact with the illegal drug trade, did lead them to try harder substances. But this was not the primary cause of the counterculture's degeneration.

After 1967, the counterculture began its decline as increased media coverage caused tens-of-thousands of young people to descend on countercultural hot spots such as Haight-Ashbury. This marked a key shift as the counterculture increasingly entered the mainstream and the weight of numbers exacerbated existing difficulties and caused new problems. Alex Foreman remembers San Francisco in 1966: '[T]he city was just exploding with this counterculture movement. I thought, "This is it!" It was like paradise there. Everybody was in love with life and in love with their fellow human beings' [Foreman, 2001]. After the 1967 'Summer of Love', however, 'it got very ugly very fast. People got into really bad drugs like speed and heroin. There were rip-offs, violence, guns being drawn, people really malnourished, hepatitis, people living off the street' [Foreman, 2001]. Troubled youths who came in search of the ecstasy and meaning that LSD was said to provide soon embraced mind-numbing substances [Stevens, 1987]. Within months, Haight-Ashbury was unrecognisable as its original countercultural inhabitants escaped *en masse* [Lee and Shlain, 1992]. Nancy Getz reflected angrily on the destructive media-driven invasion: 'The Haight was our town. It was sunshine and flowers and love. And the media got hold of it and ate us and fed us back to ourselves' [Lee and Shlain, 1992].

Conclusion

LSD was a crucial ingredient in the formation of the American counterculture. The drug continued to shape and change the movement throughout the 1960s as more and more young Americans were influenced by the substance itself and by the cultural aura it created. I have argued that LSD greatly affected countercultural ideas, symbols, fashions and music. Acid also fostered a sense of community within the counterculture, while distinguishing it from mainstream American society. LSD's ability to bend the user's perception encouraged the

questioning and rethinking of social mores. The drug had some negative effects, but it did not play a major role in the counterculture's decline, which was instead caused by an unsustainable media-driven influx of youths.

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