MIND FOUNDATION

Psychedelics: Politically pluripotent

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> *"Psychedelics are politically pluripotent: they can strengthen all sorts of political movements depending on the political orientation of the individual and the environment – the political set and setting."*

Are psychedelics political? Can politics be shaped by psychedelics? Are psychedelics capable of influencing political opinions? If so, do they shift those who use them toward the left, or toward the right? These questions are difficult and controversial. Addressing them is increasingly important as psychedelics re-enter the mainstream imagination.

A judicious overview of the literature reveals that psychedelics are unlikely to inherently steer us toward any particular political orientation. This may lead some to suggest that psychedelics are fundamentally non-political. However, psychedelics have played a prominent role in both left- and right-wing political movements, leaving us with an apparent contradiction. Resolving this contradiction requires a deeper look into both the scientific research and the sociopolitical history of psychedelics. Since this contradiction has been particularly visible in the context of US politics, the present article will focus on the debate from an American perspective.

Left, right, or neutral?

Psychedelics have traditionally been associated with countercultures, such as the hippie and anti-war movements of the 1960s. An icon of this association is a 1969 photograph of an anti-war protester holding a sign that says "Drop acid, not bombs". Last year, a man photographed during the marches protesting the murder of George Floyd held a sign that read "Cops need to do ayahuasca." These signs illustrate how a subsection of the libertarian left 1,2 (known to some as the "acid left" 3) has long endorsed psychedelics as tools for defying state violence. Some go even further to suggest that psychedelics relate to left libertarian views in general.

Interestingly, there is some observational research conveying this notion. A 1971 study by McGlothlin et al. documented a link between the non-medical use of LSD and belief in “(1) individual freedom with respect to areas such as abortion, homosexuality and pornography, and tolerance of protest actions such as flag burnings; (2) foreign policy favoring unilateral disarmament in the interest of world peace and deemphasizing nationalism.” 4 A 2006 study by Lerner et al. showed that users of psychedelics scored significantly higher on measures of “concern for others”, significantly lower on preoccupation with “financial prosperity”, and marginally higher on “concern for environment” when compared to controls or users of other illegal drugs. 5 In 2017, Nour et al. published a study showing that naturalistic use of psychedelics “positively predicted liberal political views, openness and nature relatedness, and negatively predicted authoritarian political views.” 6

Although these studies certainly suggest that users of psychedelics generally align with the libertarian left, their findings are merely correlational. In other words, it may be that individuals on the libertarian left are simply more likely to use psychedelics, which by no means entails that psychedelics *cause* beliefs to shift toward the libertarian left. Hoping to document a causal relationship, Carhart-Harris et al. published results from a small 2018 trial showing a tiny shift toward anti-authoritarian views in patients receiving psilocybin for depression. 7 Here the link was indeed causal due to the interventional nature of the study, but the changes barely approached statistical significance.

Nonetheless, all the aforementioned studies heralded a wave of enthusiasm in the “acid left”, touting psychedelics as the key to a socialist ecotopia. This enthusiasm has been met with much resistance, both from scientists and social theorists. For instance, Oxford bioethicist Eddie Jacobs raised an important ethical question in an article in the Scientific American: would it be ethical to give people drugs that could change their core beliefs? 8 Johns Hopkins neuropsychologist Matthew Johnson responded to Jacobs, also in the Scientific American. He argues that based on the available data, psychedelics are unlikely to change our beliefs. He keenly points out that the McGlothlin study showed no significant difference in the beliefs of those receiving psychedelics for *medical* treatment compared to the general population. Johnson thereby makes a strong case for psychedelics being politically neutral, seeking to dissuade “alarmist” ideological criticism of psychedelic psychotherapy.9

However, the prominent role of psychedelics in today’s chaotic sociopolitical milieu is undeniably alarming. The recent storming of the US capitol by an LSD dealer 10 and a self-proclaimed psychedelic shaman 11 reveals a disturbing intersection between psychedelics and the right-wing. Psymposia writers Brian Pace and David Nickles evoke ample evidence of this intersection: Trump-supporting magnates have provided massive funding for psychedelic clinical trials, arguably resulting in a disproportionate focus of such trials on treating military personnel, while underprivileged populations are overlooked. 12 Project MK-Ultra stands as a terrifying historical example of the CIA’s disastrous (but failed) attempt to weaponize psychedelics for mind control. Some neo-fascists have even claimed that LSD was “key to their embrace of Nazi ideology”. 13 In this light, psychedelics start to look like potential instruments of right-wing extremism. 14

Overall, this is a confusing picture. The libertarian left wields psychedelics as “geopolitical panacea.” The authoritarian right wields psychedelics as weapons. Researchers at Johns Hopkins insist psychedelics are politically neutral. What is going on here?

Psychedelics promote social adaptation

Is it tenable to consider psychedelics as politically neutral in light of their important part in left- and right-wing movements? Before answering this question, it is important to distinguish between two connotations of the term “neutral”: we could consider psychedelics to be neutral in the sense that they are non-political, or we could consider them to be neutral in the sense that they can be used as tools for any political movement.

The former interpretation seems untenable given the ample sociopolitical history of psychedelics. The latter interpretation seems possible, although it requires more evidence. So far, this evidence is scarce, as Matthew Johnson has pointed out. But even Johnson, who appears to be spearheading an attempt to depoliticize psychedelics, admits that they can be used for explicit harm due to their ability to induce "behavioral plasticity." Brian Pace puts it more bluntly, claiming psychedelics can make people "gullible." 10

The Carhart-Harris group puts it more gently. They published a study in 2014 showing that LSD increases "suggestibility." Their experiment consisted in asking healthy volunteers on LSD to rate how vividly they experienced suggestions of mental imagery read to them by the experimenters. Unsurprisingly, subjects on LSD reported experiencing more realistic mental imagery compared to controls. 15 This could be taken as evidence that psychedelics could facilitate political persuasion, although mental imagery is hardly a good indicator of political opinions.

Better evidence may lie in recent research by Duerler et al. Their experiment showed that LSD promotes "adaptation to opinions similar to one's own." First, they asked participants to rate the quality of a piece of artwork. Then, they gave participants feedback which consisted of an average rating given to the artwork by a fictitious group of 70 previous participants. Finally, they asked the participants to re-rate the artwork. They found that participants on LSD were more likely to change their ratings to more closely match the group rating. However, this only occurred when the group rating was already close to the participants' original rating. This suggests that psychedelics can lead us to change our views to match a group norm, but only if it is relatively congruent with our pre-existing views. 16

Psychedelics as politically pluripotent

If Duerler's findings are confirmed, they could substantiate the idea that psychedelics strengthen the cohesion of political groups by motivating individuals to adapt their opinions to the group norm. This would occur regardless of the group's specific ideology. Liberals may become more liberal in the context of a liberal movement, and conservatives may become more conservative in the context of a conservative movement. This might make psychedelics look like instruments of radicalization. However, if psychedelics are merely promoting "adaptation to opinions similar to one's own", it follows that moderates would become more moderate in the context of a moderate movement. It would also suggest that calls for radicalization would fall on deaf ears if the subject's opinions were not already predisposed toward such ideas. Finally, it would even explain the lack of changes in opinion in the context of psychedelic therapy – if therapists are instructed not to introduce their own political beliefs, patients would emerge from therapy with unchanged ideological inclinations.

Once again, we see that psychedelics have a wide range of effects depending on circumstances. One could describe this metaphorically by borrowing technical terminology from biology: psychedelics are *pluripotent*. The word pluripotent is usually used in the context of stem cell research. It refers to the ability of a stem cell to differentiate into multiple different cell types depending on environmental factors. This concept fits squarely with the well-known wisdom that psychedelics can induce great distress or great rapture depending on set and setting, making them "psychologically pluripotent." Correspondingly, psychedelics are politically pluripotent: they can strengthen all sorts of political movements depending on the political set and setting. Here, the "political set" is the political orientation of the subject, and the "political setting" is the political orientation of the environment.

I hope the introduction of these concepts helps account for the variable political repercussions of psychedelics. Future research should systematically vary the political sets and settings of psychedelic experiences to elucidate how psychedelics impact individual political opinions and, more broadly, sociopolitical milieus.

For instance, to investigate the effects of psychedelics on individual political opinions, the paradigm used in the study by Duerler et al. could be modified. Participants would undergo evaluation about their political views (the political set), and be asked to rate politically charged statements instead of abstract artwork. Politically charged group feedback (the political setting) would then be presented, and participants would re-rate the statements. It is likely that participants on LSD would be more inclined to adapt their political ratings to the group feedback, as long as the group feedback is not dramatically different from their original views.

To investigate the effects of psychedelics on politics more broadly, surveys of members of political organizations could be undertaken. Questions would evaluate whether members have taken psychedelics, and how psychedelics impacted their political views. I suspect that such studies might confirm the pluripotency of psychedelics, not only at a psychological level, but at a sociopolitical level as well.

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