

Psychedelic Platitudes. Remembering an Anthropology of the Perennial

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Psychedelic drugs have returned to psychopharmacology laboratories. Since my book *Neuropsychedelica: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* came out in 2012, the psychedelic renaissance has only gained steam and quite a few anthropologists and historians have followed suit (LANGLITZ 2012). Many readers have taken their cues from the subtitle and read the book as an ethnographic chronicle of an event in the history of European and American psychopharmacology and drug culture. A different subtitle might have encouraged a different reception: “Remembering an Anthropology of the Perennial” would have directed the reader’s attention toward a less timely but ultimately more important contribution of the book to anthropology at large. *Neuropsychedelica* raises the question of how to deal with eternal truths which appear so worn and frayed that they have lost all power to move us. This question touches at the heart of anthropology as a social science.

The German social theorist Niklas LUHMANN (1989) pointed out that the mystery of God has given way to the mysterious intentions of other people. If they haven’t taken a structuralist or poststructuralist turn away from interpreting their subjects’ intentions, critical social scientists seek to discern hidden interests behind seemingly innocuous discourses, including religious and spiritual ones. Cosmological secrets are for the credulous. And yet even the sociologically enlightened ponder and endlessly divine a new mystery of the world, which appears as obscure to them as the will of God does to the faithful. In late modern cosmology, the future has taken the place of an occasionally radiant but at present mostly dark otherness. Anthropologists observing and participating in the contemporary world have responded to this by shifting their research focus from other cultures and their beliefs in otherworldly things to their own culture’s construction of emergent phe-

nomena such as the psychedelic experience in the age of cognitive neuroscience. What is still emerging does not fully exist yet. Even the near future remains unobservable. What the anthropologist can do is chronicle the changing imagination and the making of an unknowable future.

While I wrote *Neuropsychedelica* as such an anthropology of the emergent, the book ends by opening up an alternative approach. As an anthropology of the perennial, it turns to an entirely different mystery. People resurface from psychedelic journeys—but also from other life-shaking experiences—with insights that sound utterly banal: “The ground of all existence is love.” “Everything is connected.” “All is one.” The underground chemist Alexander SHULGIN who had synthesized more than 200 novel psychedelic compounds put this very well after ingesting 500 mg of mescaline, a substance that Native Americans had probably used for more than five thousand years: “Funny, I’d forgotten that what comes to you when you take a psychedelic is not always a revelation of something new and startling; you’re more liable to find yourself reminded of simple things you know and forgot you knew—seeing them freshly—old, basic truths that long ago became clichés, so you stopped paying attention to them.” (SHULGIN & SHULGIN 1991: 262) Those of us who have neither had experiences of this sort nor crossed over into the New Age tend to dismiss such truths as esoteric. But what if platitudes were eternal verities divested of lived experience and emotion? What would an anthropology look like that explored the secret of these truths hidden in plain sight?

When I wrote *Neuropsychedelica* fresh out of medical school, my focus was on the integration of mystical experiences and a materialist conception of the human mind in the knowledge culture of psychopharmacology. Today, I might shift the focus of my attention from the construction of the

psychedelic experience in neurochemical terms and in laboratory settings to a different aspect of this culture, which I touched upon, but did not elaborate. The neo-Platonic experience of *anamnesis* described by SHULGIN points to remnants of a culture of revealed knowledge, which persist in a modern epistemic landscape dominated by empiricist and constructivist tropes (cf. GUMBRECHT 2012: 126).

Laboratory work has become the paradigm example of scientific research and has trained the disciplinary eye of anthropologists of knowledge. They observe how scientists understand and bring about the world by synthesizing proteins in a test tube or by guiding their human subjects's psychedelic experiences in PET scanners. Laboratory researchers learn about nature through artifice and, having followed them for long enough, laboratory ethnographers have come to see the construction of real phenomena everywhere, even in the field sciences. "What do the people who have created this phenomenon intend?" ask the ethnographers. "What interests do they pursue? What biases color their projections of the world?"

But remember the by now almost mythical scene of Albert HOFMANN's discovery of LSD. In 1938, he synthesized and tested a series of ergotamine derivatives to develop a new circulatory and respiratory stimulant for the pharmaceutical company Sandoz. The twenty-fifth substance in this series was lysergic acid diethylamide, which was shelved after showing no promise in animal experiments. As a rule, Sandoz eliminated experimental substances from its research program if they were of no pharmacological interest. Nevertheless, in 1943, HOFMANN (1983: 14) followed a "peculiar presentiment," a mere hunch that this substance could possess properties other than those originally established, and repeated the synthesis of LSD. In the process, he accidentally contaminated himself and discovered its psychotropic effects. This led Hofmann to believe that he did not find LSD but that it was LSD that found him.

The reception—and probably already HOFMANN's telling—of this tired anecdote has been colored by the experience of a drug widely understood to open up insights into the burning brightness of unmitigated reality by temporarily dissolving the ego. The idea that human beings

have to let go for truth to show itself is a remnant of a pre- or nonmodern culture of revealed knowledge. Can we imagine a culture in which human agency was not key to the "production" of knowledge? In which the subject of knowledge had to step aside, maybe even eliminate itself?

Attending to the perennial philosophy, which continues to inform many protagonists of the psychedelic renaissance, opens up a new line of research in anthropology. In the last three or four decades, much work in cultural and medical anthropology has been informed by Michel FOUCAULT. In his lectures on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, FOUCAULT (2005: 460) distinguished three modes of relating subject and truth in the history of Western thought: memory, meditation, and method. Anthropologists have mostly been interested in meditation as an alternative to method (e.g., RABINOW 2003). Whereas method separates the truth from the subject of knowledge—if they follow a given research protocol, anyone should arrive at the same findings—meditation presupposes that the truth is only accessible to people who have conducted a certain work on themselves. Even in the modern sciences, researchers still have to fashion themselves as scientific personae, exercising particular epistemic virtues to see the world as they should (DASTON & SIBUM 2003). Foucault's third mode of reflexivity in which the subject cultivates a relationship to truth through memory has been largely ignored. But the *philosophia perennis* of the psychedelic renaissance has given rise to such neo-Platonic technologies of the self, which do not aim at grasping the truth of the soul as an object of knowledge but the truth the soul knew in its original state. The Socratic mastery of memory complements the knowledge that we don't know with the discovery that the knowledge we lack is to be found quite simply in memory itself: we didn't know that we knew. Thus, the sense of coming home induced by psychedelic ego dissolution, which has become a recurrent trope in trip reports, would amount to a recollection of what it was like before the subject was constituted as a subject.

In a research environment that is obsessed with the new, shifting the focus on practices of memory that reveal what we have supposedly always known but forgot we knew might not be as attractive as chronicling the latest scientific re-

volution. But reconstructing the lived experience that forcefully animates psychedelic and other platitudes might remind cultural anthropologists that there are aspects of human life that are neither culturally nor historically contingent, that others have stumbled upon before us, and yet coming to understand for ourselves what they actually mean can be mind-blowing. *Neuropsychedelica* was also an attempt to pave the way for such an anthropology of the perennial that traces singular rearticulations of everlasting truths and fills these eternal verities with life again. But such an anthropology appears to have fallen out of time. Its future remains a mystery.

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