

Psychedelic Socialism: The Politics of Consciousness, the Legacy of the Counterculture and the Future of the Left



This is an extended version of my [article for Red Pepper on ‘Acid Corbynism’](#). It’s over seven times as long as that one, and it gets pretty rambling in the latter sections. So if you don’t like long strange trips, just read the *Red Pepper* version, which is much shorter.

Details of the ‘Acid Corbynism’ session at this year’s *The World Transformed* conference are [HERE](#).

Acid Communism - a note on the ‘origins’ of an idea...

When my friend Mark Fisher died in January, he had been working on a book with the provisional title *Acid Communism: on Post-Capitalist Desire*. He had discussed the book with me, but I only saw the draft introduction when a mutual friend sent it to me after he died. A few days later, some of

his students at Goldsmiths College sent me a copy of the curriculum for his MA course on 'Post-Capitalist Desire', asking me if I, along with a number of other invitees, could contribute a session to allow the course to complete.

I still haven't worked out how to express the very strange complex of feelings I had when reading over this material. To put it bluntly, it felt like Mark was putting forward a set of arguments and ideas that I'd been developing for several years in different forms - not least in direct conversations and public discussions with Mark - and which were quite different from the positions he'd held before we started collaborating, a few years earlier. There was no direct reference to my work in any of it; but more than half of the references and reading list consisted of books that I'd suggested he read. There were lines in the introduction to the book that were more or less direct paraphrases of comments I'd made to Mark, or arguments I'd put forward in essays, articles or books published in recent years, that I knew very well that he'd read.

Of course, the arguments were all put in Mark's unique and inimitable idiom, and there were plenty of references and connections that I wouldn't have thought of making. Still - the experience was strange, and remains so. Was I hurt? Flattered? Angry at the lack of acknowledgement? Glad that our collaboration had led to Mark expressing positions that I agreed with so absolutely? Jealous that he had thought of connections that I hadn't? All of the above, I suppose.

I make these points only in order to explain, as honestly as I can, that any account by me of what Mark meant by 'Acid Communism' can't avoid the fact that I always already had my own interpretation of what such a phrase could mean, from the moment Mark first uttered it. 'Acid Communism' was Mark's term for a political and analytical position that he'd derived more than a little from my work and interests, as well as from his engagements with the radical affinity group Plan C, and with the historiography of the 70s in the work of John Medhurst and Andy Beckett. But

it would be totally against the spirit of those shared ideas and priorities to attribute ownership or authorship of any of these ideas to anybody¹.

Mark came up with the expression 'Acid Communism' when publicity for a proposed film about the life of the Scottish radical psychologist, R.D. Laing, a key figure of the British counterculture in the 1960s, described Laing as an 'acid Marxist'². 'Acid Communism' became Mark's term for a political sensibility shared by both the psychedelic experimentalists of the counterculture and by the political radicals of the 60s and 70s. This utopian orientation rejected both the conformism and authoritarianism which characterised much of post-war society, and the crass individualism of consumer culture. It sought to change and raise the consciousness of singular people and the whole society, be that through the creative use of psychedelic chemicals, aesthetic experiments in music and other arts, social and political revolution, or all of the above.

Mark himself had never had any personal interest in psychedelics or psychedelic culture (like mine, his interest was aesthetic, political, historical and theoretical), but he liked the idea of 'Acid' as an adjective, describing an attitude of improvisatory creativity and belief in the possibility of seeing the world differently, order to improve it, deliberately 'expanding' consciousness through resolutely materialist means. In fact, when we first got to know each other, he still considered himself a hippy-

¹ As Erik Davis pointed out to me, the term 'Acid Communism' could be taken to mean something very close to what Goffman & Joy call the 'Freak Left'. This is exactly right, although I think Mark was referring to a rather more diffuse sensibility: a psychedelic socialist structure of feeling, a generalised aspiration for, in Mark's words 'a world that would be free', shared much more widely than the specific milieu of radical groups that gave rise to the Weathermen etc. But that 'freak left' of explicitly pro-psychedelic militant radicals to which Goffman and Joy refer was certainly in some sense the ultimate literal example of Acid Communism.

² Laing's legacy was a subject that Mark and I had once talked about organising an event on, with Steve Goodman, but we never got around to it. Laing is a very interesting but also very problematic figure in British radical history. I think he was more or less personally responsible for trashing the reputation of the anti-psychiatry movement in the UK (and psychedelic therapy), with his abusive attitudes to some of his patients, after which there was no real equivalent of the clinical and theoretical work being done by Guattari and his colleagues at the La Borde clinic in France, or by practitioners of integral and transpersonal psychology in the US.

hating post-punk, utterly dismissive of the legacy of both the summer of love and the radicalism of '1968'. But I (and others, I guess) persuaded him that it was a mistake to go along with the views of figures like Slavok Zizek, or Adam Curtis, which simply dismissed the counterculture and the radicalism of the 60s and 70s. These commentators tend to focus on how the utopianism of the counterculture apparently led directly to the banal individualism of New Age and of late twentieth century narcissistic consumerism. But I have always argued that those outcomes were distortions of the radical potential of the counterculture, which had to be neutralised and captured by a capitalist culture which found itself under genuine threat from radical forces in the early 1970s.

Higher Consciousness and Technologies of the Self

From this perspective, techniques of self-transformation like yoga, meditation,(or even psychedelics, in theory) might have some kind of radical potential if they are connected to a wider culture of questioning capitalist culture and organising politically against it. By the same token, of course, they can just as easily become banal distractions, ways of enabling individuals to cope with every-intensifying levels of exploitation and alienation, without ever challenging the sources of those problems. These 'technologies of the self', to use Michel Foucault's term, have no inherent political meaning. The question from a political perspective is if and how they can be used to raise political consciousness, challenging entrenched assumptions of capitalist culture, enabling people to overcome their individualism in order to create potent and creative collectivities.

For the women's movement of the early 70s, the most important 'technology of the self' was probably the 'consciousness-raising group': small groups of women who would meet to discuss all kinds of personal and social issues from a feminist perspective, seeking to liberate themselves from

³ See <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo3644914.html> and https://www.academia.edu/5107975/After_68_Narratives_of_the_New_Capitalism

sexist and patriarchal assumptions. This was also the moment when Black Power and the Gay Liberation movement reached their most intense levels of politicisation, and when the politics of the 'New Left' was at its most influential. What linked together all of their political positions was a rejection both of traditional hierarchies and of any simple individualism. These movements were libertarian, promoting an ideal of freedom, but they understood freedom as something that could only be achieved or experienced collectively.

Mark was interested in reviving the idea of 'consciousness raising', and in theorising the effects of capitalist ideology in terms of 'depletion of consciousness'. This is a particular way of thinking about the effects of ideology on groups and individuals. 'Ideology' is sometimes understood simply as a form of propaganda, giving us a false impression of the world in order to prove the the interests of the powerful elite. Certainly when we look at how the kind of flagrant misrepresentation of the world engaged in by the right-wing press it can seem that this is exactly what happens. But many thinkers have also explored the idea that ideology, and various apparatuses of power (from the state to the church) function not just by feeding us lies, but by affecting us negatively in order to make us feel less able to act in the world, less able to think creatively or dynamically. From this perspective, 'raising' consciousness isn't just a matter of giving people information about the sources of their oppression, but of enabling them to feel personally and collectively powerful enough to challenge it.

There's a fascinating confluence between the idea of 'higher' consciousness which emerges in some of the mystical, yogic and philosophical literature of the twentieth century, and the idea of politically 'raised' consciousness which became so central to 1970s radicalism. Both of these ideas had older antecedents. The idea of raised political consciousness had its roots in the Marxist idea of 'class consciousness', whereby workers come to realise that their shared interests as workers are more significant than their private interest as individuals, or the cultural differences they may have with other workers. The mystical idea of 'higher' ('elevated', 'universal' or 'cosmic') consciousness

has its roots in Hindu and Buddhist ideas that the individual self is an illusion. Escape from that illusion, realisation that the self is only an incidental element of a wider cosmos, is sometimes referred to as 'enlightenment', but the original Sanskrit and Pali terms might be better translated as 'awoken'. Maybe it's not an accident that 'woke' has become a popular radical slang term for raised political consciousness.

Acid Corbynism

Many writers thinking along similar lines have argued that radical politics can take strength and inspiration from cultural forms which promote feelings of collective joy (festivals, disco, etc.), overcoming the alienating individualism of capitalist culture. An interest in this, and all of these other ideas about consciousness-raising and radical social organisation, motivated some of the organisers of The World Transformed, and Labour activist Matt Phull, to approach me about the possibility of creating a space to discuss them at this year's event. It was Matt who actually came up with the phrase 'Acid Corbynism' during one early conversation (on the dance floor at a Lucky Cloud Loft Party), and it quickly became apparent that this was the perfect term to hang a wider discussion on, because the key question for us was whether it would ever be possible to link the politics of the current Labour left to this tradition of utopian experimentalism.

In fact there are already historical links between them. A crucial feature of the politics of the New Left was its critique of bureaucratic authoritarianism. The huge corporations of the post-war industrial boom, the paternalistic welfare state of countries like the UK, and the authoritarian institutions of Soviet state socialism were all seen as requiring radical democratic reform or revolutionary overthrow. All of them were seen as imposing order and uniformity on populations, persuading and compelling citizens to accept a single vision of the good life, be it the 'America

Dream' of suburban consumer capitalism or the Soviet vision of socialism in one country. This is not to deny the fantastic achievements of social democracy during the period, from the American 'New Deal' to the foundation of the National Health Service in the UK. These institutions offered security to the citizens of the industrialised countries, but very little autonomy. Women in particular were offered highly restricted roles. For example, the British welfare system was organised on the assumption that every household would be headed by a single bread-winning male, to whom all supplementary benefits would be paid, leaving married women fully dependent on their husbands. In response, the radicals of the New Left called for the democratisation of households, work -places and public institutions, from schools to the BBC.

Labour's recent General Election manifesto made few concessions to this tradition, being almost entirely a list of things which central government would do, and rules which it would impose. But last year Labour commissioned a study into the feasibility of implementing new co-operative and radically democratic forms of ownership of enterprises and services, reminding us that the call for workers control of industry was part of the radical tradition associated with Tony Benn and his followers in the 70s and 80s (the most famous of those followers being Corbyn himself). The politics of the New Left directly informed that of Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council in the 1980s, where shadow chancellor John McDonnell first came to political prominence (and McDonnell was a fan of Mark's first book *Capitalist Realism*, when it came out). Although critics of Corbynism see it as a personality cult focussed entirely on the leader himself, Corbynite activists have found themselves part of a largely self-organised movement, seeking to raise public consciousness and their own political effectiveness through the use of cutting-edge communications technologies. Perhaps today, it's campaigning apps and organising platforms that are our radical technologies of the self.

Whether these tendencies can be developed into a full-blown project to democratise British institutions (including the Labour Party) remains too be seen. But history suggests that political and social change on the scale that we seek must be accompanied by extensive cultural innovation. Pro-Corbyn memes and football chants are a start. What new forms of expression may emerge in the years ahead, nobody can predict. What seems certain, however, is that the struggle against neoliberalism and authoritarian conservatism will require forms of culture and political organisation which are collectivist without being conformist, liberating without simply breaking social ties. What remains a less certain, but still tantalising proposition, is that somehow techniques of ‘consciousness expansion’ derived from the mystical and psychedelic traditions might be put to work in the service of progressive politics and radical consciousness-raising.

Acid Corbynist Praxis: co-production, consciousness raising and radical democracy

What might be some of the practical and political implications of these speculative suggestions? At the level of government, and demands which could be placed on government, one such implication would be a radical democratic agenda promoting a vision of a twenty-first century socialism based on principles of co-operation, collaboration, experimentation. A key feature of the counterculture, psychedelic culture and the New Left (from the Merry Pranksters to SDS to the Diggers to the Loft to many manifestations of the commune movement) was always the attempt to find new forms of non-hierarchical, experimental, creative collectivity. There’s no reason why such principles can’t be applied to the design and implementation of public services⁴, as Mark and I argued in a pamphlet we wrote together several years ago. In fact some very mainstream ideas in social policy have developed around the idea of recognising social service outcomes as ‘co-produced’ by services users and professionals, rather than seeing them as simply retail services sold to customers by ‘providers’.

⁴ See my book *Common Ground* for a bit more elaboration of this argument.

At the same time, the experimentally technophilic aspects of much of the counterculture, and its proximity to the emergent culture of silicon valley, has been very well documented , while the desire to escape the routinised cycle of work and consumption which Fordist capitalism had installed was always its driving motive force. Today, utopian hopes of a future in which technology is socially deployed, in order to vastly reduce the time most people have to spend at work. in which the sharing economy could be genuinely shared (through the collective ownership of social media and platforms like Über, for example) have been widely revived. The aspiration for a society in which human life is not dictated by the demands of toil is surely one shared by socialists, artists, bohemians and mystics. In a moment I'll discuss more specifically some reasons why this should be the case.

The idea that actual modes of organisation should be informed by similar principles of distribution and equality has already been well established. The pro-Corbyn movement in the UK includes many participants who have passed through or been influenced by movements such as Occupy, Climate Camp or the 2011 campaign against the raising of university tuition fees. In all of these cases practices of radical democracy inherited from the alterglobalisation movement and ultimately from the New Left of the 60s and 70s have played an important role.

However, to date it must be said that it is nothing more than the general spirit and mood of those movements which has had any real effect on the Labour Party or the the pro-Corbyn organisation, Momentum. While innovative apps and platforms directly enabled the revolution in grassroots campaigning and counter-hegemonic media production which characterised the June 2017 General Election campaign , actual decision-making practices within the Labour Party has not been reformed at all, despite one of Corbyn's first promises as leader being a renewed democratisation of

the party. It remains to be seen whether serious efforts will be made to allow any such thing to happen.

Raising Consciousness

The final element of praxis to consider here is one that can only be discussed speculatively, but has enormous potential implications for the future of left politics. Mark's interest in the idea of a politics of consciousness was directly inspired by his engagement with Plan C. In particular, Plan C had been experimenting in recent years with the idea of the consciousness-raising group as a useful form of radical politics. Historically, within the women's movement and then within strands of gay liberation and black power, such groups served a number of purposes. Primarily they served as vehicles for collective political education, theorisation and analysis, generally raising the levels understanding of gendered power relations, within the movement and beyond it. At the same time they served a kind of therapeutic and what we might call a 'super-therapeutic' function, enabling participants both to overcome their sense of personal alienation and disenfranchisement and to feel increasingly empowered to engage with a patriarchal society on their own terms; by which I mean terms set by the movement and its demands, not simply the personal 'terms' of each individual woman.

This latter point is crucial, and it indicates something about what any form of progressive 'consciousness-raising' would have to involve today. Consciousness raising has always meant coming to an understanding that one's 'personal' problems are in fact not individual, discrete, private elements of experience at all, but the effects of large-scale social and historical processes; and that the solution to those problems cannot be found through individual actions of any kind, but only through solidarity and creative collaboration with others with whom one shares material interests. It is always, on some level, the effects of individualism which consciousness-raising seeks

to overcome. By ‘individualism’, I mean not just casual selfishness, but rather a whole ideology and world-view which assumes experience to fundamentally individual in nature: private before it is public, personal before it is social. As I’ve argued several times elsewhere, this is just a demonstrably mistaken assumption, even though it is fundamental to Anglo-Saxon capitalist culture.

The contradiction in which almost all of us find ourselves living, in the over-developed capitalist world, in the early twenty-first century, is this. On the one hand many of us are quite aware that the classical bourgeois liberal idea of the ‘individual subject’ is nonsense. We know that we are all products of social relations, that nobody comes into the world alone, that we are dependent upon a vast network of social relations to meet every one of our material needs; that our bodies are teeming with symbiotes; that our brains are not individual computers isolated behind the firewall of our skulls, but networked galaxies of neurones, dependent all the time upon interaction with the rest of the ecosystems we inhabit for their ability to function at all; that even our dreams are not merely our own.

But at the same time, we inhabit a culture whose institutions, laws, economies and social practices have for centuries been organised around the opposite idea, attributing individual responsibility to every action, treating private property as the foundation on which society is built, teaching us that private emotion is the seat of authentic experience. Under these circumstances, learning to function in such a way that the knowledge that nobody is really an in-dividual (i.e. indivisible, independent of social relations) becomes more than just abstract theory, is immensely challenging. It’s one thing to know all this in theory. It’s another thing to undo all of our individualist conditioning and to negotiate a wholly individualist set of social institutions, without finding ourselves being forced to behave like competitive individualists despite ourselves, or without simply going crazy. Ultimately

if consciousness-raising has a purpose it must be to assist us with this work, both at the level of singular subjectivities and in groups on every scale.

Technologies of non-self

And here's where the whole countercultural panoply of raves, drugs, yoga, chi-kung, Zen etc. might come back into the picture. Because in fact, this is precisely what most of these collections of techniques have always been designed to do. The early scriptures of the Buddhist canon are very clear - the fundamental 'fetter' from which the practice of meditation is supposed to free us is 'self-view': the mistaken belief in the permanence and consistency of our individual selves. Modern yoga derives from tantric practices seeking unity with the divine (like all theistic mysticisms), which is different from the buddhist Nirvana of non-existence, but which nonetheless involves an equivalent abolition of the individual subject's individuality. If the discovery of psychedelic drugs - which can induce experiences comparable to classical mystical experiences regularly and repeatably has made one major contribution to scientific thought, then it is to demonstrate conclusively that such experiences are not supernatural or fictitious, but inherently corporeal, material, and physical. In fact if the words 'acid' or 'psychedelic' designate anything in phrases like 'acid communism' or 'psychedelic socialism' (or just 'psychedelic culture') then they could be taken to refer to a set of practices and ideas which are at one and the same time mystical and materialist - a materialist mysticism which acknowledges the complex potentialities of human embodied existence, without tying that recognition to any set of supernatural or theistic beliefs. This materialist mysticism would treat the investigation of technologies of non-self as one of its key priorities.

Super-Therapeutic Practice

Could such technologies of non-self be put to work in the service of radical collectivist politics?

This isn't a new question or a new idea, although concrete examples of such ends being achieved in recent years - outside of isolated projects in North America - are hard to find. What could such projects even be imagined to involve? Here perhaps we have to distinguish between therapeutic and super-therapeutic uses of such practices. By 'super-therapeutic' I mean something more than just fixing people up, repairing some of the damage done by daily life under advanced capitalism so that they can get on with their lives. I mean something which might have those effects but also go beyond them, enabling people to become extraordinary empowered precisely by enhancing their capacity for productive relationships with others (which capacity is precisely what John Protevi names, after Deleuze and Spinoza, 'joyous affect').

We can already point to countless examples of yoga or meditation classes being offered cheaply by community facilities, and accessed by hard-working citizens and activists who would find it much more difficult to function productively without them (e.g. <https://www.facebook.com/events/894900297233531/>). In general however, the normal expectation is that the effects of such practices will rarely exceed the merely therapeutic - except in the case of very rare practitioners who can dedicate themselves almost full-time to those practices. And such full-time devotion is likely to preclude them from any serious involvement in wider struggles, political work or social innovation.

Of course we shouldn't dismiss the value of having forms of therapy which are not more harmful than the problems whose effects they seek to remedy (as many types of therapy, such as those relying too heavily on anti-depressant drugs, almost certainly are). If people can use yoga or whatever to feel better without getting themselves hooked on tranquillisers, then that's something good. But it's also kind of a waste of a technology that's as powerful as yoga, only to use it in this remedial way, when the point of it is supposed to be a completely re-engineering of the psychosocial system which is a person and their body / mind / psyche / spirit / etc.

One mundane material issue here is time. In a capitalist society, most people survive by selling their time for currency which they can exchange for consumer goods. This is one of Marx's most basic and most perspicacious observations. And Marx is specific - it's not our labour as such which we sell, but our capacity for labour - what he calls our 'labour power' : in other words, mainly, our time. (This is why is it always an issue for capitalists to figure out how to extract the most possible actual labour from the labour power that they have purchased - do you whip the workers on the chain gang or let them play arcade games until they feel like writing some code? At the end of the day these are both answers to the same question which the capitalist muse ask herself- 'how do I extract actual labour from the labour power that I paid for?'). As long as too many people have to sell too much of their labour power for too little money, simply in order to survive, then they will have to spend too much time at work. Under theses circumstances, only specialised professionals will ever have time for a really transformative practice.

At the same time, a related key issue is that of what kinds of social or political practices, configuration, institutions or habits might help to enable these technologies of non-self to become progressive rather than regressive forces. This is a fundamental point. Like almost any technology, these practices might have certain tendential properties, based on their actual measurable physical effects on bodies. But what the wider social or cultural significance of those effects might be will depend entirely on the ways that they are used, by whom, to what ends, in what contexts. This applies in no more or less the same way whether we're talking about, say, the Linux operating system or mescaline or mindfulness-of-breathing meditation. They can all be used in many different ways depending on context and intention.

The Politics of Mindfulness

The last of these is an interesting example to think about. The social status of ‘mindfulness’ practice has been among the most controversial topics to have arisen from the popularisation of certain meditation techniques in recent years. In brief, what happened is that a set of meditation techniques which had been practiced for thousands of years by full-time buddhist monks were gradually adapted for lay practice during the last decades of the twentieth century, and in recent years these techniques have increasingly been re-purposed in social contexts with little connection to the buddhist tradition or the established institutionalised networks of monastic communities and their lay supporters (the ‘Sangha’, as a religious community is called in the buddhist and Hindu traditions). Many of these contexts have been explicitly therapeutic, with forms of cognitive therapy based on mindfulness meditation claiming extraordinary results in the treatment of depression, for example. At their furthest from traditional buddhism, these contexts have included corporate training sessions at which participants are taught short meditation exercises whose intention is merely to lower the stress levels and increase the capacity for concentration of the practitioners, by practising for short periods regularly, in order to make them more efficient profit-maximisers for their employers.

Most of the public controversy over these issues seems to have focussed on the question of whether or not these latter forms of mindfulness practice are in any way ‘authentic’ and whether they can or should still claim any specific doctrinal affiliation to traditional buddhism (eg. see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sarah-rudell-beach-/is-mindfulness-a-religion_b_6136612.html). From the perspective that I’m proposing here, this is at best an incidental set of issues. The question from this point of view would be in some sense much simpler - not ‘is it really buddhist?’ but simply ‘what is it doing?’ And more specifically ‘is it helping or obstructing the political struggle against neoliberalism?’

Yes I know the answer to that question might be ‘neither helping nor obstructing’. In which case, the practice in question just would not be particularly relevant to this particular discussion.

But in an instance like that of the mindfulness debate, the relationship between the question of ‘authenticity’ and the political question that I’ve just raised might be very complicated. This is because we can’t really know what kind of effects these new social and institutional contexts might be having on the practice without knowing what it was supposed to do in earlier ones. In the case of mindfulness meditation this is a particularly crucial thing to know. Because you really would not know from almost any of the literature, institutions or teachers who are busy promoting mindfulness these days, that the aim of this practice in its original monastic context is the complete and total abolition of the individual subjectivity of the practitioner. It’s not supposed to be medicine for the troubled soul, reconciling it to a complex world. It’s only supposed to make you feel better about yourself to the extent that it’s supposed to annihilate your attachment to any sense of self whatsoever. It’s supposed to be a practice engaged in by those who have already renounced all material possessions, all claim to any form of meaningful individuality, outside of the specificity of their own meditative practice (which, according to the rules and regulations of their monastery, they will share with others 90% of the time), and its aim is the attainment of that state of enlightenment within which the substantial non-existence of the individual self is fully realised and accepted.

Now, I’m not saying that this monastic tradition is something to be be venerated just for its own sake (maybe it is, but that’s not the issue for now). It’s certainly problematic in many ways (the place of women in orthodox buddhist tradition is, to say the least, controversial, for example). It may have had some political valencies at certain times in its history, but mostly it’s a tradition informed by the ideal of renunciation rather than social or political engagement. And yet, one thing we can definitely say about the buddhist monastic tradition and its living embodiments is this: the whole complex of monasteries and their rules basically adds up to a great big machine designed to

ensure one thing above all. It's designed to ensure that the practice of meditation does not lead to is any form of individualistic solipsism, or mere defence of the existing sense of self and identity of the singular practitioner. And this is pretty much what any form of meditative practice is at risk of becoming if you don't have mechanisms in place to prevent it happening. And the political upshot of this is that if you want to abstract a set of meditative techniques from such a context, and then disseminate them in a culture within which neoliberal hegemony has made the privatisation of personal experience into an irreducible norm of everyday culture, then you can be pretty sure that a means of defending privatised individual egos from a troublesome social world is exactly what that technique will end up being turned into, unless you have some specific practices in place to prevent it from being so.

Of course I'm not saying that only monks should meditate. I am saying that we should aspire to a society in which anyone has enough free time to be able to practice their meditation to near-monastic levels if that's what they want to do (but this also applies to golf, beekeeping, theoretical physics and the study of cultural theory). More immediately, however, I'm saying that there is almost certainly a need for forms of social practice and institutional culture which can replicate some of the traditional roles of the Sangha for practitioners, while maintaining a sense of explicit critical and political vocation in their organised and solidarity with progressive political forces and explicit hostility to regressive ones, if we actually want to avoid things like mindfulness meditation just becoming further mechanisms for the development and defence of well-functioning, highly individualised neoliberal subjects. This isn't a new idea, and in the US in particular, there already exist examples of well-developed buddhist communities who explicitly place a radical political project at the core of their understanding of the practice and its social role. To a lesser extent there are similar communities practicing yoga, tantra, Taoism, etc.

Change the World to Change Yourself

Even in such contexts, however, far too often we encounter the assumption that somehow, doing various kinds of physical and psychological work on oneself can be regarded as an inherently progressive practice. The slogan which sums up this assumption is ‘change yourself to change the world’ (or some variation of that). It cannot be over-stressed what a totally misconceived idea this is, and how fundamentally it reproduces the basic assumptions of a liberal individualism which any true radical politics must oppose. It’s not that you shouldn’t want to change yourself. It’s that if you don’t recognise that *you can only change yourself by changing the world around you*, then your political consciousness level is still somewhere around zero. And from the psychedelic socialist, acid communist perspective that I’m trying to delineate here, this would equally mean that your spiritual advancement would not have got very far at all. Because the idea of changing yourself to change the world assumes that ‘yourself’ is a thing that actually exists. It doesn’t. It’s just a part of the world and a product of it.

So doesn’t that mean that you can *start* with the part of the world that happens to be called ‘yourself’, and that by changing it you will already have changed a part of the world?

Well yes okay to some extent, but only if the ‘change’ that you intend to make is directly oriented towards the full realisation of the fact that that ‘self’ exists only and entirely as an effect of the infinitely complex set of evert-shifting relations which constitutes it⁵. And under current historical circumstances, I’d suggest that this is going to be very difficult outside of some organised, politicised effort to resist the effects of neoliberal ideology and its institutions. Because neoliberal ideology and its institutions are constantly working to force us or persuade us to behave as narcissistic, competitive alienated individuals. Under these conditions, your attempt to ‘start’ with ‘yourself’ *will* lead ‘yourself’ to become a trap from which you cannot escape unless you have

⁵ Again, I talk a lot about this and about the idea of ‘infinite relationality’ in *Common Ground*.

some very definite plan to ensure that it doesn't, and no such plan can be effective which has no political dimension.

What should such a plan entail? I don't know - maybe joining a consciousness-raising group?

Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out?

Does all this mean that it's simply impossible for some people to just live a quiet life, extracting themselves as far as possible from the logic of capitalism without being part of any organised challenge to it, in a classically Taoist fashion? Growing organic food, working outside the rat-race, staying way from it all? Dropping out, as Timothy Leary once recommended?⁶ I'm not sure. I have good friends who take no interest in politics but who try to live this way and seem to me that they are generally making the world a better place anyway, and would be on the right side if we found ourselves in a period of major confrontation between capitalist and democratic social forces. What I note, however, is that they are almost always engaged in some kind of social, collective or community-oriented practice of some kind, and that their choice of lifestyles precludes any possibility of them ever becoming wealthy. What they're not doing is working for a Silicon Valley behemoth but practicing mindfulness to make themselves feel better. I think their claims to be outside politics and against capitalism are more or less justified.

What can't be reasonably countenanced is the claim that such behaviour constitutes some more genuinely radical form of politics than actual radical political organising: this is the fallacy of 'folk politics'. But folk politics (claiming that primitivism and localism are inherently radical) is not the same thing as knowingly choosing anti-political quietism as an option. I don't honestly think that

⁶ Leary recommended a lot of things. This wasn't the Acid Communist Leary. The Acid Communist Leary was the one who said that the clear light of the buddha was the flash from a revolutionary's gun.

anyone can look at the state of the world and say that anti-political quietism is an irrational choice to make. I don't make it, encourage it or endorse it; but I think we have to understand it.

But none of that is very relevant to our discussion here. The point of this is to figure out what we might do if we are interested in linking countercultural activity with actual radical politics.

Psychedelic Socialism

One thing that very rarely happens, even when efforts are made to bring technologies of non-self into direct contact with explicit radical politics, is any real attempt to consider how theoretical insights from one domain might inform the other. There are isolated but very interesting examples of attempts to bring insights from, say, feminist and postcolonial theory onto, say, the practice of yoga (e.g. <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com>). But could we imagine a situation in which a feminist and historical materialist account of exploitation and alienation co-incides with, say a tantric understanding of energetic flows in the subtle body, in order to develop new forms of physical and / or political practice? Is this really any more unlikely a prospect than the various marriages into which people have been trying to force Marxism and psychoanalysis for the past century? One very isolated but interesting example of such a project is Ann Weinstone's 2004 book *Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism* (Weinstone has since changed her name and become a devotee of Andamayi Ma), although ultimately this book is an apologia for tantra deploying some elements of contemporary critical theory (most Deleuze and Derrida), rather than any real synthesis of the two.

Weinstone's basic point is that tantra's embrace of radical anti-individualism, corporeal materialism / non-dualism (ie the belief that body and spirit are the same thing, on some level, if not on all levels) and of positive affects of pleasure and desire as potential vectors of liberation, all have

a certain strong affinity with strands of post-humanism, radical politics and critical theory. This is all accurate so far as it goes.

One direction in which such thinking would lead might be to use ideas like Weinstone's as ways of illuminating what possibilities might exist for imagining how good human life could be and on what terms. What if liberating human body-brain-mind systems from the prison of liberal individualism were a guiding aim of social and economic possibility? Even if this sounds a bit too exotic for the massed ranks of the UK Labour Party to get behind, it raises a very important question. Margaret Thatcher had a notoriously clear vision of what kind of people her legislation was intended to produce (and what kind it was intended to punish). 'Economics are the method: the object is to change the heart and soul', she famously declared. Her objective in privatising public services, cutting public spending, reducing taxes on the rich and undermining the unions was to produce a nation of hard-working, aspirational, yet sober and self-disciplined protestant entrepreneurs.

But what kind of persons might Corbynism, or any contemporary socialism, want to produce? Wouldn't it be people able to grant themselves 'the full extent of their complexity' (as David Toop once said of the musician Arthur Russell), able to enjoy and be joyful in the fact of their 'infinite relationality' (to use a phrase of mine) with the rest of the human population and the cosmos? Wouldn't that be a better guiding principle for, say, health and education policy than the relentless pursuit of gross national product? Or more accurately, wouldn't it be a good way of orienting debates over whether, and when, and how, to pursue increases or decreases of GDP (or any other policy objective)? And isn't the fact that talking like this makes me sound like a crazy hippy merely a symptom of the political success of Thatcher and her kind? Doesn't overturning her legacy mean, in part, re-admitting such ideas and preoccupations to public discourse?

Against Hippyphobia

This was exactly the argument I made to Mark, years ago, when I suggested to him that his ‘hippyphobia’ was itself just a symptom of ‘capitalist realism’ (his term for the belief that neoliberal capitalism could never really be truly escaped transcended or defeated). Such hippyphobia has been a strong element of Left discourse since the nineteenth century. There are plenty of good reasons for it. The amount of bullshit associated with every spiritual and meditative tradition, not to mention psychedelic culture, is more than enough to put off any self-respecting, intellectually-alert radical intellectual. But the same could be said of Marxism, frankly, if you were only to respond to the worst that has been written, said and done within that tradition. The fear of racist exoticism should inform every possible encounter between white westerners and ideas from other places. But the notion that such fear should prevent any form of intense engagement is itself just tantamount to a kind of ethnic purism. At the end of the day, hippyphobia is just a lazy habit, exhibiting none of the critical objectivity that it nominally claims to endorse.

It’s pretty clear by 2017 that simply dismissing out of hand the possibility of practices such as yoga and meditation having any genuinely transformatory effects on either singular persons or wider groups, is itself a lazy gesture with no empirical basis. It’s also pretty clear that we don’t know that much about how these technologies actually work - they have their own models to explain their efficacy, based on things like the Indian / Chinese model of internal energy currents in the physical or ‘subtle’ bodies, but these don’t map onto anything much that current biophysics is able to identify, verify or quantify. What is evident is that these collections of physical and psychological techniques have a certain potency, the social effects of which depend on their specific modes of usage. So from a radical political perspective, we might as well try to figure out what we can do with them. If nothing else, as already mentioned, they clearly provide useful techniques for treating the debilitating psycho-physical effects of capitalism (alienation, depression, anxiety etc.)without resort to dangerous drugs or to forms of psychotherapy which are more deeply intertwined with

liberal bourgeoisie ideology (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, mainstream psychoanalysis, etc.). At their best they may prove genuinely useful in the creation and cultivation of forms of politically effective group behaviour: what I like to call 'potent collectivity'.

Afropsychedelia and Identity Politics

Some of this thinking can shed interesting light on a key issue in contemporary Left debates: the debate over 'identity politics'. The way in which this debate is normally presented is roughly as follows. On the one hand there is the classical 'class politics' of the Left, which focusses entirely on issues of economic power and distribution and which sees phenomena such as racism and misogyny largely as side-effects of capitalism, or as ideological tools used by the capitalist class to sow divisions within the working class. On the other hand we have 'identity politics' which recognises racism, sexism and heteronormativity as specific forms of oppression which affect people on the basis of their membership of particular identity groups, and which sees any attempt to unify people across those identity groups as tantamount to an intensification of that oppression, to the extent that it tries to marginalise the importance of their specific experiences in the name of some idea of unified class struggle. In fact it is very difficult to find anyone who has ever actually advocated for such a simplistic version of either of these positions.

One of the many problems with this debate is that it tends to get caught up in an imaginary argument over whether class, race or gender are more important categories than each other, while never quite focussing on the real issue which critiques of 'identity politics' first tried to engage with from the 1980s onwards. That issue was never merely about class vs other categories. It was more importantly about different *ways* of addressing forms of systematic oppression along gendered,

raced or other axes. The way in which these issues were addressed by the radical movements of the 60s and 70s was to see them as collective problems to be overcome through collective struggle.

An alternative way of addressing these issues which became increasingly prevalent in the 80s and 90s was to treat them as issues primarily affecting individuals, and to see any attempt to generate collective solutions to them at all as potentially or even inherently oppressive to those individuals. This is essentially a form of radical liberalism, which sees racism, sexism and heteronormativity as problematic not because of the way that they oppress particular groups of people systematically, but because of the ways that they limit particular individuals from participating fully and without prejudice in the life of a competitive, market-oriented consumer society. The problem with it is that it ends up treating both oppression and empowerment as essentially things that happen to individuals. From this perspective, personal identity becomes something to be defended like private property, while racism etc are treated more-or-less as intrusions on that private property - to be legislated against at various institutional levels - rather than as social problems whose solution is the creation of more opportunities for public discussion, debate, and the construction of shared forms of social power.

The antithesis of such a liberal-individualist, privatised form of identity politics would not be simply some kind of simplistic 'class politics' (and no, I'm not saying that class is not central to politics- if anything, it is so universally important to all politics that the very notion of 'class politics' is simply oxymoronic. The point is that all politics involves class issues and conflicts between competing class interests, but this does not mean that the issue of class struggle covers or exhausts all political questions). The antithesis of this liberal individualism would be a politics which sought both to democratise all social relations and to render visible, changeable and questionable the social and provisional nature of all supposed 'identities.'

This isn't just a hypothetical proposition that I'm putting forward. A great example of this kind of politics in effect is the positions taken by the British Gay Liberation Front in the early 70s. This early campaigning organisation actually *rejected* the UK government report (the Wolfenden Report) which recommended the decriminalisation of homosexual acts between consenting men, precisely because it predicated its arguments on the claim that sex was a private matter. Taking their lead from the women's movement assertion that 'the personal is political', GLF argued for a position which sought to make gender and sexuality, and the power relations within which they are always caught up, subjects for open public discussion and questioning, not simply matters of individual privacy.

It seems to me that this is an attitude which shares a great deal with the historic buddhist suspicion of *all* personal identity and with the psychedelic desire to explore sensation and perception beyond the limits of such individualised selfhood. I also think it's a radical , experimental, collectivist sensibility which finds expression in some of the most exciting and lastingly important cultural output of the late 60s and early 70s. The intersection of black and anti-colonial liberation politics with countercultural psychedelia gave rise to a range of extraordinary sonic experiments in the work of Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, Cymande, Herbie Hancock, Santana, Alice Coltrane, Parliament / Funkadelic, etc, and the emergence of an afro-psychedelic aesthetic which persists today in the work of deep house producers such as Joe Claussell. All of this music is notable for the ways in which it uses improvisation, experimental studio recording and range of other sonic effects to produce work which sounds at the same time incredibly free and incredibly collective. It rarely sounds like just a soloist with a backing ban, and even compared to the jazz of the 1960s, it is often characterised by a real democratisation of the different elements of the group (Miles Davis' *On the Corner* remains perhaps the most perfect expression of this tendency - the trumpet of Miles himself

almost disappears into the multitudinous miasma which his band becomes, and the effect is astonishing).

This 'afro-psychedelia' rarely gets a mention in official histories of the counterculture and its legacies, partly because they tend to be so fixated on California (where none of the above were based, until Alice Coltrane moved to an Ashram in 1972), and partly because the 'psychedelia' which characterises this tradition has always been less focussed explicitly on drug use - and therefore less easy to sensationalise - than has been its 'white' equivalents (the Grateful Dead and their followers, for example). Certainly within this tradition, substances like LSD have played important roles (acid was popular with New York jazz musicians in the 60s, for example), but they have always been only one technology among others, with techniques such as yoga, and above all various forms of music-making and recording, playing an ultimately more significant role. This is a very interesting source of potential inspiration, I think, for any psychedelic socialism. Just as Mark intuited, 'psychedelia' or the 'acid' or 'acid communism' need not designate any particular interest in drugs as such. They might simply refer to a general willingness to deploy material technologies of non-self in order to explore forms of consciousness and potent collectivity not limited by the ideological forms of liberal individualism.

Freedom is An Endless Meeting

Finally what would really be at stake in the idea of a psychedelic socialism would be a radically different conception of freedom to the one which we have inherited from the bourgeois liberal tradition. Within that tradition, freedom is basically equated with the capacity to own, and dispose of private property. Freedom is a property of individuals and it is indissociable from individual property. What's public and collective is inherently oppressive - a fetter on the freedom of the

individual. Psychedelic socialism would be one manifestation of a quite contrary tradition, which understands freedom and agency as things which can only be exercised relationally, in the spaces between bodies, as modes of interaction. It would be the creation, constitution and cultivation of spaces of collective creativity (be they schools, laboratories, dancefloors, ashrams, workshops, or gymnasia) which it would seek, while recognising how hostile capitalism must always be to them.

Of course ‘psychedelic socialism’ or ‘acid communism’ would not be the only names for such a politics. We might just as well call it ‘radical democracy’ or ‘libertarian communism’, ‘liberated socialism’⁷ or even just ‘Twenty-First Century Socialism’. But whatever we want to call it, I suspect that the legacy of the counterculture and the various technologies of non-self which it helped to popularise in the West will play a significant role in it, if it is to become a viable political project in the 21st century.

Yoga and Discos For All

(thanks to Holly Rigby for that slogan)

Finally a few points about what the upshot of all this is and isn’t. No, I’m not saying everyone should take psychedelic drugs (which are illegal in most countries), or take up yoga, or anything else in particular.

No, I’m not romanticising the counterculture of the 1960s - but I think its ‘problems’ and ‘failures’ have become so well known and so well-documented that it has become easy to forget both that it had some significant positive effects, and that its failures were not just intrinsic to it, but a result of its political defeat by the New Right and its allies.

⁷ Jo Littler suggested this term to me.

I do think that the lessons of that history and its consequences should be learned by anyone who wants to see either a revived and successful counterculture or a successful democratic left.

Because the evidence suggests that without a strong, vibrant, popular and strategically successful political left, then any kind of counterculture will just end up being captured by capitalism. At the same time, I think it's simply impossible to imagine a successful political challenge to neoliberalism which isn't allied in some ways to a broader culture rejecting neoliberal and bourgeois values generally, and if that isn't going to look something like the counterculture of the 70s then I don't know what it is going to look like (Mao's Cultural Revolution?). Of course we could say that it would also look like the great wave of aesthetic experimentation of the 1920s, on which the counterculture itself drew for inspiration - but that would be a whole other essay.

I haven't talked about ecology here, or a bunch of other stuff which is obviously relevant. If you're really interested then you can go read my book *Common Ground*, where I do talk about all that stuff at much more length.

For now let's say that I'm saying that yoga and discos could be useful radical technologies, when used correctly. And I don't know exactly what 'correctly' would mean - but I invite us all to try to find out. And an aim of any 21st century socialism, or any Acid Communism, should be yoga and discos for all... (all who want them, anyway).

