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Evaluating the role of psychedelic psychotherapy in addressing societal alienation: Imaginaries of liberation

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ABSTRACT

Questions are currently being posed concerning the implications of the clinical uptake of psychedelics. While enthusiasm surrounds the potential therapeutic benefits of psychedelics and critique surrounds their appropriation to commercial ends, limited attention has been given to the role of psychedelics in generating social transformation. Herbert Marcuse contended radical change requires ‘new imaginaries of liberation’. We consider whether clinical uptake of psychedelics may produce the perceptual shifts necessary to generate social transformation surrounding contemporary alienating conditions. Economic structures contributing to these alienating conditions are highly resistant to change and may neuter psychedelics’ revolutionary potential. We illustrate how psychedelics may be instrumentalised: regulating individuals into unjust systems; redirecting psychedelic usage away from therapeutic ends towards productivity; distracting or diverting attention from systemic forms of control; usurping non-ordinary states into the domain of self-care; and fetishistically commodifying psychedelic experience as a consumable. There are, however, reasons to believe that psychedelics, in raising consciousnesses, may prove resistant to co-option. In particular, psychedelics induce perceptual experiences that: challenge the paradigmatic assumptions of industrial society by provoking alternative epistemologies and metaphysics; generate expanded or ecological constructions of selfhood, thereby offering resignifications of meanings, desires, and life potentials; and offer the enriched phenomenological insight into self, other, and world called for in combating ubiquitous social alienation. In this way, psychedelics may induce the revolution in perception necessary to imagine liberatory potentials and spark the desire for collective emancipation.

KEYWORDS

psychedelics, marxism, critical theory, alienation, anomie, Marcuse

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary industrialised societies are characterised by experiences of anomie and alienation. Marxist and neo-Marxist theorists identify economic structural conditions as the drivers of social inequity and dehumanizing conditions. With the uptake of psychedelics in clinical practice we are seeing what is being termed a ‘psychedelic renaissance’. Critical theorists are only beginning to consider what the psychedelic revolution, and its clinical uptake, imply for the alienating conditions produced under contemporary forms of capitalism. The Marxist frame of *false consciousness* describes the way in which material, ideological, and institutional processes mislead the underclasses, and conceal the exploitation intrinsic to the social relations between classes (Engels, 1893). This inhibits the liberatory imagination by naturalising oppressive conditions.

In this article we address the question: how might the clinical, and widespread, uptake of psychedelics constitute a mode of revolutionary praxis in the face of societal alienation? Marcuse contended that radical societal change must entail both change to social institutions and the character structure of individuals *within* society. On this view personal liberation is a

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pre-requisite for social emancipation. The suggestion defended herein is that psychedelics, through their potential to produce in the populace new *imaginaries* of liberation, may generate the required characterological change to serve revolutionary ends. We therefore extend upon Marcuse's account, by going some way towards characterising the mechanism by which psychedelics bring about such perceptual change.

To this end, we begin by elucidating the role of psychedelics in producing perceptual insight into an expanded or ecological sense of selfhood. In this way psychedelic experience may offer enriched phenomenological access and insight into self, other and world, leading to the potential resignification of meaning systems entrenched by capital. In this way psychedelic engagement may contribute to both liberatory consciousness and revolutionary action. By considering the ritualised and ceremonial function of ethnomedicine for Indigenous peoples, we illustrate the need for containership if psychedelics are to induce stable state change and perceptual shifts with socially transformative ramifications. We will then turn to addressing some of the concerns surrounding the co-option of psychedelics by market forces. We contend ultimately that the perceptual shifts engendered by psychedelics may be genuinely revolutionary, even in the face of such appropriative attempts. We will begin however, by characterising the problem of alienation in contemporary society, from the standpoint of critical theory.

CHARACTERISING THE PROBLEM OF ALIENATION

Before characterising the psychedelic revolution and exploring how its widespread and clinical uptake may serve socially emancipatory ends, it is important to describe the conditions critical theorists feel we must seek emancipation from. The materialist, dialectical and class-oriented economic theory proffered by Marx (1887) suggests that capitalism's framing conditions lead to alienation as the economy is structured to incentivise the valuing of *things* to the detriment of the value of humans. As a consequence of this incentivisation process, material wealth is prioritised over externalities such as wellbeing, flourishing, psychosocial development, and life. Economic growth orientation in capitalist economies has not been met with equal gains in community wellbeing; more generally, free-market societies lag behind government-intervention oriented states in terms of social welfare. Under capital, human needs are adapted to the needs of economic expansion: that is, 'exchange' value is privileged over 'use' value. This occurs as values for *living* reside outside the sphere of profit-oriented private markets, consequently market growth is frequently accompanied by the diminishment in life value of the worker. This economic orientation towards profit generates a division of labour which in turn produces alienating effects for the majority.

The Frankfurt School suggestion, to which we are sympathetic, is that our prevailing economic and social structures are responsible for many of the symptoms of modern-day alienation (Adorno, 1966; Fromm, 1941; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). Symptoms—including anger, anxiety, sadness and loneliness—are the product of a wider socio-political structure which severs the relational threads of interconnection that are required to sustain human wellbeing. This condition of generalised alienation is generated by contemporary forms of consumer capitalism, while also providing fertile grounds for such capitalist consumption, within a feedback structure. That is, a situation in which vulnerable individuals seek comfort and solace in the purchase and fetishization of surrogate forms of gratification—unconscious means of seeking to temporarily fill the voids of meaning produced by an economic structure that orients towards collective anomie or estrangement from the self.

Marx's (1932) *Entfremdung theory*—the theory of estrangement from self—identified the forms of alienation characteristic under capital. This account describes the estrangement of people from important aspects of human nature as a consequence of economic stratification and the division of labour, which reduce human beings to mechanistic parts of a social class. In this context *labour*, a fundamental social aspect of personal individuality, can only be expressed through a private system of industrial production in which each worker is an 'instrument', and thus a *thing*, not a person. Marx's theory speaks to four forms of alienated estrangement. The worker, though an autonomous self-realised being, loses the ability to determine their life. By losing the right to own the results of their own labour and direct their productivity they are alienated from their work and its products; by losing the right to define their relationship with others non-economically, they are alienated from society; and thereby through the loss of all self-direction the worker becomes alienated even from themselves (*Gattungswesen*, or 'species-essence').

The result is a workforce of individuals shaped into an automatised mass, driven into a mode of obedience, unthinkingly responding to political givens. The populace is inducted into a state of false consciousness which both generates a false set of desires through the fetishisation of commodities, and naturalises this alienated mode of living (Marx, 1887, p. 35). Consequently, we see the ways in which factors of production, such as human labour, are frequently accompanied by the diminishment of human consciousness, the dulling of self-awareness, the impoverishment of human subjectivity, and the loss of agency under the tyrannical mechanization of time. Gramsci builds upon Marx's account by describing the invisible yet pervasive power of ideology. Gramsci (1971) maps the ways in which the hegemonic ideology of the ruling class is disseminated and accepted as common-sensical and normal, thereby producing self-abnegating beliefs and perpetuating the false consciousness of those governed. The value systems and mores of society are structured to serve the interests of the ruling class; in the latest iteration of capitalism this has meant a need for 'conspicuous consumption' in order to increase perceived



scarcity and drive economic growth (Phillips, 2014). Indeed, there are important psychodynamic mechanisms by which unconscious interiorisation of the requirements of capital reproduction and societal regulation occur, via the subtle and pervasive effects of hegemonic ideology upon the body, language, market, and relationship.

It is crucial to acknowledge that there exist very real, pervasive and resistant mechanisms by which capitalist machinery and hegemonic ideology persist. In what follows we will consider the potential for modes of revolutionary consciousness, which might produce insight into the hegemonically inculcated desires that shape the socio-economic practices of consumerism, and thereby serve as potential implements in redressing alienation, freeing our potential for liberatory imagining and enabling a re-valuation of our politico-economic structures. Having considered the Marxist account of alienation we will turn now towards the potential role of psychedelic revolutionary perception in bringing about these liberatory imaginings.

PSYCHEDELICS AND RADICAL CHANGE

An important social critic and Marxist scholar within the Frankfurt School of critical theory, Marcuse offered significant contributions to the critique of capitalism inspiring intellectual thought and political activism across the 1960s and 70s. As will be contended, Marcuse retains his relevance, offering a framework within which to begin conceiving of the liberatory potential of psychedelic substances.

For Marcuse there can be no substantive change through gradualist means of slow institutional adjustment, rather he contends that radical societal transformation requires that we:

...distinguish radical change of an entire social system from changes *within* that system. In other words, radical change must entail both a change in society's institutions and also a change in the character structure predominant among individuals in that society. (Marcuse, 2019, p. 8, emphasis added)

This quotation is reflective of Marcuse's (1976/2013) thesis in *One Dimensional Man* that capitalism cannot be reformed from *within*, yet nor can material or ideological economic tendencies be introduced from *outside*. He acknowledges that structural forces are interiorised by oppressed members of society, thereby reproducing oppressive structures.

Marcuse believed that the capitalist mode of production could be expected, ultimately, to establish conditions that would lead to its own abolition. He suggested psychedelics had a potential role in accompanying this radical process through producing changes to character structure, as a mode of applied political psychoanalysis. Psychedelics, in producing change within individual consciousness and importantly insights into unconscious processes, may provide a foundation for radical structural change. In particular, Marcuse suggests psychedelics may birth new imaginaries of liberation, necessary for reimagining economic structures. As he remarks:

the revolution must be at the same time *a revolution in perception* which will accompany the material and intellectual reconstruction of society, creating the new aesthetic environment. (Marcuse, 1969, p. 37, emphasis added)

Radical change calls for redress not only at the institutional level but also at the level of individual perception. We will consider the suggestion that the form of perceptual alteration, or consciousness expansion, occasioned by psychedelic substances may produce the change necessary to overcome false consciousness, by increasing awareness in the populace concerning their alienated conditions. In this way psychedelics may contribute to the struggle to mitigate or even reverse capitalism's destructive tendencies.

Valid concerns can be raised that revolutionary struggle to liberate society from oppressive features of gendered, racial and class-based social institutions and practices are prone to being 'gamed' by market forces. Hegemonic ideology, in constraining the worldview of the people, may redirect attention away from collective structures of oppression, thereby neutralising revolutionary action. Marcuse's suggestion is that, by contrast, the liberatory imaginaries produced through psychedelic experience have the potential of countering such gamification; by reorienting attention away from in-house conflict and towards redressing the structural forces which produce the collective experiences of anomie and alienation. We will examine the perspectival transformations occasioned by psychedelics, and how these birth liberatory imaginaries in what follows.

PSYCHEDELIC PERCEPTION AND LIBERATORY IMAGINARIES

"Much of the research surrounding psychedelics at present concerns the quest to identify the biochemical 'mechanism' by which these substances induce therapeutic benefit. Yet, seeking physiological alteration to resolve issues of mind and mindedness is a product of a physicalist reductionism that renders the mental merely epiphenomenal, as we contend elsewhere." (Dowie & Tempone-Wiltshire, 2023). Furthermore, as we will explore here, such an ambition draws attention away from the broader project of understanding psychedelics function within a cultural container and within social systems. For Marcuse, the revolutionary potential of altered states of consciousness relates to their ability to call into question our current repressive social tendencies. These repressive tendencies, in the psychoanalytic language developed by Freud, include:

The formation of a competitive and aggressive ego, the idea of sharp boundaries between the self and diverse environments, the obsession with unidimensional language and conduct, and the orientation of communication systems around private property. (Freud cited in Ramon, 2022, p. 145)

To understand Marcuse's account of psychedelic action it is worth considering an example he gave relating to his concept of *repressive de-sublimation*. This term describes the



manner in which the post-war profusion of sexual provocations, under the guise of ‘sexual liberation’, contributed to the generation of a mass culture preoccupied with inauthentic sexual stimulation. For Marcuse this served to de-sublimate the masses’ political energy. Consequently, instead of utilising that libidinal force to act constructively in changing the world, that energy remained repressed, reinforcing an uncritical political quietism. Marcuse suggests the consciousness induced by psychedelics may challenge the libidinal economy required for this mechanical mode of production; thereby revitalising the *Eros* which has been diminished and redirected by capital.

Whilst Marcuse opens on to some important elements of revolutionary perception, we hope to offer a fuller characterisation of psychedelics’ potential for generating liberatory imaginaries. As such we will extend upon Marcuse’s account by exploring the mechanism by which psychedelics, alongside the alternative epistemologies and metaphysics they may induce, may reveal and interrupt entrenched repressive tendencies of mind such as: pervasive competition; the naturalisation of oppressive structures of hierarchy and private property; and the perceived sharp delineation between self and other, as well as human and environment.

Currently in emergence is a new language around the use of psychedelics as agents for raising self-awareness through epistemic and ontological transformation. Psychedelics in inducing perceptual shifts which dissolve the boundaries between self, other and environment occasion an expansion, or re-conception, of the sense of self (Fadiman, 2011; Lutkajtis, 2020; Maté, 2021). When freed from the narrow definition of self that dominant capitalist ideology engenders, individuals find themselves newly capable of imagining possibilities that capital has alienated them from. As will be discussed, the term *Entheogen* has come to denote the use of psychedelic substances towards such self-revelatory goals, or insights into self-nature; in a range of contexts both religious and secular, though heralding back to traditional Indigenous ritualised use of ethnomedicines. First, we will explore how transformations of the conception of self effects this challenge to alienation in what follows.

PSYCHEDELIC DISRUPTION OF SELF MODELS

Psychedelics are commonly described as a subclass of hallucinogenic drugs whose primary effect is to trigger non-ordinary mental states and an apparent expansion of consciousness. The mechanism of action by which psychedelics induce transformation of self may be summarised in the etymology of the term *psychedelic*. The term *psychedelic*, derived from the Greek word *psychē* ‘soul, mind’ and *delein* ‘to manifest’ offers the intended meaning “mind manifesting” (Weil & Rosen, 2004). The implication being that psychedelics induce non-ordinary states of perception that generate insights in our unconscious processes and patterns of thought and behaviour. In this way psychedelics might be understood, in relation to psychodynamic, aesthetic, and contemplative traditions, as revealing facets of the human mind.

Psychedelic perceptual shifts ‘revealing facets of mind’ may be conceptualised in the mentalization tradition as increasing individuals’ *metacognitive awareness* (Carcione, 2019) or *reflective function* (Allen, 2018; Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008), by offering novel, unmediated, experientially-sourced knowledge claims. Research into the organising effects of psychedelics is still somewhat in its infancy, however the Rome school and the mentalization tradition offer promising avenues to deepen this dialogue. The increase in metacognitive awareness could be understood in Marxist terms as a move away from false consciousness, and as such might constitute a mechanism to loosen capital’s ideological hold upon the underclass. Such a mechanism may render the populace less ‘gameable’ by capital.

One form of increased metacognitive awareness, which has received significant attention in the scholarly literature, concerns the way in which psychedelics may alter, and expand, one’s sense of self, in turn transforming how people relate to their own minds and lives (Letheby, 2020, 2021, 2022). More specifically, a number of authors have suggested that psychedelics induce a perceived sense of the dissolution of subject-object duality: that is the dissolution of the ordinary perception of ourselves as *subjects* distinct from, over and against, a world of *objects*. As explored in the forthcoming article *the Nature of Nonduality: epistemic implication of psychedelic experience*, open questions exist concerning how to best characterise the perspectival shifts induced by psychedelic substances.

Greater scholarly attention upon the nondifference of subject and object, the perceived sense of unity, and the interconnectedness of all things purportedly occasioned by psychedelics is required. At present there exists no consensus upon whether, and if so how, psychedelics induce a form of unitary nondual experience, involving the dissolution of the perceived demarcation of a subject-object distinction. There are various postulated physiological mechanisms which attempt to account for what produces this experiential dissolution, however at this stage, there is no conclusive physiological correlate. One account proposes that the mental representation of self, world, and other is linked to diminished activity in the Default Mode Network (DMN)—associated with reductions in ‘self’ oriented or egocentric thinking, alongside reductions in mind wandering. Such reduced DMN activity has been measured in both deep meditative states and psychedelic experiences (Gattuso et al., 2023; Palhano-Fontes et al., 2015). Whilst the mechanism by which psychedelics induce perceived self-dissolution remains unclear, for our purposes there is reason to believe that such experiences may disrupt foundational beliefs that are constructed and reinforced by capitalism.

One such foundational belief reinforced under capital is the conception of self in ‘atomistic’ terms. Authors such as Langman (2009) explore the dehumanizing and objectifying tendencies that characterise capitalism; particularly drawing upon Adorno’s critique of the way the logic of exchange relationships can insinuate themselves into the family and community, thereby colonizing the individual’s understanding of subjectivity. Horkheimer (1972) extends on



Adorno's thinking by considering how the internalization of authority relations, the law of value, and modes of instrumental reason, lead to the deformation of individuals' internal 'superegos'. This adaptation suppresses desire, alongside the understanding of self as relationally embedded, in the service of sustaining neoliberal political economic arrangements. Meanwhile scholars, including Jaeggi (2014), have drawn upon Hegelian phenomenological analysis of the modern conception of agency, to explore how socio-economic structures incentivise living situations characterised by an absence of meaningful relationship to both oneself and others; a situation which manifests feelings of helplessness alongside the despondent adoption of alienated social roles and expectations.

The suggestion has been made that the 'atomised' perception of self—as alone in a hostile world in competitive relation with others for limited resources—may be challenged by experiencing oneself as *inseparable from* the world. As we contend, further work on elucidating the effects of psychedelics upon reflective function ought to involve engagement with the fields of interpersonal neurobiology, affective neuroscience, and right-brain psychotherapy—frameworks that provide a neurological and phenomenological account of the developmental effects of psychedelics upon brain plasticity. These models offer a rich account of self-construction as mediated through relational dynamics (Maté, 2005; McGilchrist, 2019; Panksepp, 2004; Schore, 2019; Siegel, 2012). We will consider the transformative potential of alternative understandings of self, which may arise from self-expansion, through recourse to notions of ecological selfhood.

ECOLOGICAL AND EXPANDED SELF

Through a Marxist lens, industrial techno-rational society has inhibited our connection with the Wild, a connection which constitutes a vital expression of human nature (Tickle, 2019). The resultant estrangement from nature is a facet of our alienation from our species-essence. The clearest expression of this alienation lies in the way we treat the natural environment as 'mere matter' to be exploited, extracted from, or destroyed for the purposes of development towards large-scale technological goals. Such treatment of the natural world results from a failure to see our place within complex ecosystems, and the cultivation of a view of humans as 'independent from' rather than inextricably 'part of' nature.

In line with the Marxist critique, Heidegger speaks to the way in which, having substituted our connection with the Wild for a humanized world, we have become alienated from the part of ourselves that *is* nature. Heidegger suggests we are alienated from the built-environments that the majority are forced to inhabit—social environments in which the tyranny of the inauthentic *they-self* reigns. As such he emphasises the importance of reorienting attention towards humanity's inextricable relationship with the earth. In this way Heidegger's critique resembles Marcuse's, in that both

call for a transformation in individual perception to bring about societal change.

Miceli McMillan (2021) also draws upon Heidegger's critique of modern techno-rationality, extended by Sveinæus, to identify some of the risks associated with the re-medicalisation of psychedelics in our modern climate marked by techno-rationality. Miceli McMillan speaks to the risks of turning ecological sources, cultural contexts and the transpersonal experiences induced by psychedelics, into resources to be exploited for human goals. We are sympathetic to this perspective; techno-rationality, and the decontextualising and extractive processes it produces, run the risk of endangering ecosystems, appropriating traditional knowledges and reducing therapeutic efficacy. We agree with Miceli Mcmillan's suggestion that preserving non-reductionist, non-instrumentalising traditional ways of understanding psychedelic compounds may prove to be an essential means of mitigating these consequences.

Heidegger speaks to a need for a perspectival shift in our orientation towards *Being*; through recognising our self as inextricably bound with the wider natural world. This *ecological-self* view has been extended upon by Naess, Fleming, Macy, and Seed (1988), Naess and Jickling (2000), Fleming, Naess, Seed, Macey, and Pugh (1988) in birthing the Deep Ecology movement. The Deep Ecology movement has emphasised the role of nature connection alongside psychedelic usage in bringing about experiential insights into this dissolution of self-environment boundaries, producing a sense of 'ecological selfhood' (Seed, 2006). This re-established ecological self, in reconnecting humans with the natural world, is considered to foster not only healing potential, but pro-environmental behaviour and social transformation.

PSYCHEDELICS ARE ETHNOMEDICINES

To understand the role of psychedelics in generating expanded or ecological self-perceptions requires actively bringing Indigenous knowledges into the dialogue surrounding psychedelic science. Beyond viewing the double-blind clinical trial as the measure of empirical value, psychedelic science must engage with the wisdom traditions and knowledge systems which offer culturally elaborated containership for the ritualised use of psychedelics as 'ethnomedicines'. Western medical contexts, by contrast, have not evolved to provide the cultural frameworks and ritualised containers for supporting the psychological integration of psychedelic experience (Fotiou, 2020). This is a current limitation in the Western clinical uptake of psychedelic medicines. By considering the millennia of ritualised Indigenous ceremonial engagement with psychedelics as entheogens we can better appreciate the potential of psychedelic substances as revolutionary agents; capable of reshaping epistemic decision-making models and metaphysical belief systems.

Indigenous peoples have maintained ongoing relationships with ethnomedicines for millennia. These substances have been utilised to induce non-ordinary states of



consciousness, perception, and cognition, in order to engender revelatory insight. What clinical engagement there has been with Indigenous ethnomedicines has unsurprisingly occurred in a highly individualistic and atomised fashion. When speaking of Indigenous relationship with psychedelics, it is important to emphasise the fact that entheogens were never taken in isolation—utilised towards mere *self-growth* or *personal development* goals—rather entheogens were used in ritualised sacred containers, crafted across generations, in order to facilitate *collective* encounter with the transcendent. As such the revelatory experience occasioned for Indigenous peoples by psychedelics ought to be understood in relation to an expanded sense of self, better encapsulated by the emergence of an ecological self, as described above (Curtin, 2014; Naess et al., 1988).

Evidently then the psychedelics revolution in perception would be stymied by the decontextualisation of psychedelics; that is, estrangement from the cultural containers—with the onto-epistemic, communal, and ritualised ‘deep’ context—out of which such plant medicines are extracted. Indeed, the collectivist nature of Indigenous engagement with psychedelics—is vital to understanding psychedelics’ potential for combating societal alienation and engendering revolutionary consciousness. There is value in considering also the intertwining of psychedelics and formation of Indigenous belief systems. Indeed, the metaphysics of Indigenous cultures have been formed in relationship with psychedelic plant medicines. Such cultures have always bound epistemology to participation in a living landscape and the forms of conscious experience evoked through relationship with place, animals, and importantly plants, or ethnomedicines (Botchway, 2014). Scholarship is emerging concerning the relation between psychedelic unitary experience and the process philosophy undergirding Indigenous belief systems (Tempone-Wiltshire, 2023). There is therefore value in reflection upon how Indigenous cultural practices—including contemplative practices of various sorts; ceremonial plant medicine use, mantra recitation, fasting practice, and meditation—play a formative role in epistemic knowledge-making and metaphysical belief system formation. The relation between non-ordinary states of consciousness and epistemic belief formation is an important subject calling for further attention, we offer a parallel exploration, elsewhere in our work, into the nature of the epistemic processes of altered states associated with Buddhist contemplative processes (Thakchoe & Wiltshire, 2019). Naturally parallel questions arise in the study of psychedelic experience.

Indeed, Indigenous ceremonial psychedelic use must be understood in relationship with the perceptions of cosmos as living Country; place-based totemic mythology and Lore; the relational metaphysics embedded in ritual and the resultant panpsychist and animist metaphysics. Engaging with the role ethnomedicines have historically played in Indigenous knowledge systems is vital to coming to understand the mechanism by which psychedelics may induce socially transformative perspectival shifts. Emerging research is beginning to acknowledge the role of embodied-, haptic-

and situated-knowledge regarding the mind-body-world connection in Indigenous science. Engagement with such research is called for in contextualising the broad relation between Indigenous epistemologies and ethnomedicine (Tempone-Wiltshire, 2023).

Whilst today there is a general acknowledgement that psychedelics achieve change via inducing non-ordinary states of consciousness, which offer insight into, and transformation of, mind (Grof, 2008, 2013), studies in Indigenous epistemology speak to the need for further exploration of the *societally formative* influence of ritualised non-ordinary states, whether they are induced or achieved via hypnotic regression, meditative absorption, ritual, or ceremonial enactment (Roger Walsh, 2018; Schroll, Krippner, Vich, Fadiman, & Mojeiko, 2009). Greater scholarly attention ought to be given to the theoretical and empirical foundations of working with non-ordinary states, if we are to have firm foundations for modern consciousness research (Timmermann et al., 2022).

Emerging research evidences the claim that psychedelic experience may induce epistemic shifts and alter metaphysical beliefs. Further research by scholars such as Winston et al. (2021) has involved formal testing of the way in which psychedelics alter metaphysical beliefs. This research involved conducting online surveys concerning perception of the nature of reality, consciousness, and free-will, and how they change following psychedelic use. Results have revealed significant enduring shifts away from physicalist or materialist views, and towards panpsychism—changes positively correlated with improved mental-health outcomes. These shifts were believed to be mediated by perceived emotional synchrony with others during the psychedelic experience.

Turning to Indigenous relationship with psychedelics bears upon our understanding of how psychedelics have afforded human beings across cultures insight, while also illustrating how psychedelics may revolutionize our prevailing Western metaphysical frameworks, epistemic belief structures, and modes of inquiry (Tempone-Wiltshire, 2023). Only in considering the bi-directional relationship between forms of knowledge—as evidenced by the usage of Indigenous custodians of entheogenic substances—can psychedelic experience be understood as not merely a form of ‘induced madness’ but rather a valuable mode of non-ordinary perception capable of raising disruptive insights into contemporary alienating conditions. The fact that Indigenous epistemologies are built in relation to psychedelics, and that multiple evidence sources demonstrate how psychedelics can shape metaphysical beliefs, provides a vital avenue by which psychedelics may contribute to inducing a perceptual revolution.

Marcuse identifies important elements of revolutionary perception, emphasising the ways in which altered states of consciousness may raise insight into unconscious societally imbued repressive tendencies. We have extended upon Marcuse’s account in providing a fuller description of the liberatory imaginations proffered by psychedelics. By inducing ‘unity’ experiences of interconnection, involving a



dissolution of perceived subject-object duality, psychedelics disrupt narrowly defined self-models—which conceive of the self in atomised and individualised terms. As a result, psychedelics may produce in individuals stable changes towards expanded or ecological perceptual models of selfhood.

Whether these perceptual shifts are couched in religious, magical, shamanic, spiritual or secular terms, what is beyond dispute is that if psychedelics are approached with an understanding of their actual mechanism of action—changing mental representations of the self, or self-insight derived through non-ordinary states of consciousness—then we can better conceive of the way in which psychedelic therapy may catalyse systems change. We have illustrated how the Indigenous relationship with ethnomedicines generates transformation in self-perception, and how via this entheogenic approach psychedelics can generate liberatory shifts in perception, provided they are engaged with within the proper frame. Whether the clinical setting constitutes such a frame is another matter, to be discussed in what follows.

It is important to acknowledge the way in which the long lineages and diverse knowledges of Indigenous cultures—which have cultivated, and grown in relationship to, these plants for millennia—have *already* been bypassed in the rush to re-medicalize psychedelics. Devenot, Conner, and Doyle (2022) explore the erasing of Indigenous wisdoms through the emergence of psychedelic capitalism. They consider how the techno-rationalist corporadelic pursuit of standardization, carves off as ‘cultural-baggage’ the wisdom traditions and traditional knowledges which were in fact foundational to these ethnomedicines. They suggest that corporate priorities, alongside the mental health field’s concern with transforming *individual* habits of mind taken in isolation, are driving out latent potential for psychedelics to draw attention to the invisible hegemonic infrastructures and ideologies which naturalise and perpetuate injustices in societies. We will explore some of the concerns that exist surrounding the socio-political structure of the therapeutic industry in what follows. However, first, we will contextualise our position within the philosophy of medicine, as concerns our stance on biomedical approaches to psychological practice.

PSYCHEDELICS AND THE SZAZIAN PERSPECTIVE ON MENTAL ILLNESS

It is important to understand both the critique of, and hope for, psychedelic psychotherapy in relation to the challenges levelled against the psychiatric establishment and biomedical paradigm. The manner in which medical uptake situates psychedelics within systems of power, that imperceptibly discipline and control the populace, are subjects close to the heart of our project (Bracken & Thomas, 2010). While a comprehensive exploration of mental illness and its relationship to social structures exceeds the scope of this paper, we will, nonetheless, contextualise our stance upon the relationship between medical institutions, social suffering, and psychiatric diagnosis. We might begin by considering the post-psychiatric critique.

The post-psychiatric critique, offered by Szasz and Laing, construes the concept of mental illness as medical overreach. According to this Szazian perspective, mental illness is not a valid medical condition but rather a *metaphorical concept* that has been mistakenly medicalized—mental illnesses are according to this view better understood as various ‘problems of living’, or forms of stigmatised ‘social deviance’, rather than psychiatric disorders (Murphy, 2010). Whilst we are amenable to the concerns raised in the post-psychiatric movement, we wish to emphasise that it is misleading to portray biomedicine, *tout court*, as an inherently alienating form of social regulation. Diagnostic constructs in psychiatry, whilst not unproblematic, can offer clinical utility. There is a wide acceptance in both the psychiatric scholarship and the medical field more generally, that illness—and in particular chronic conditions—ought to be understood as deeply intertwined with social structures. Indeed, scholars such as Huda (2021), have defended psychiatric medicine as in fact a *biopsychosocial* model. Undeniably psychiatric treatment is at least *cognizant* of the way, for instance: socioeconomic status is tied up with dental care; life-expectancy with ethnicity; or social stigmatisation with poor mental health outcomes. As such it would be misleading to identify psychiatric treatment of mental illness symptomology as reducible to *merely* the anaesthetization of an individual’s suffering produced through social alienation.

Nonetheless, when seeking to resolve pathology, while psychiatry does pay attention to the social and biographical contingencies in a patient’s life, these factors are frequently merely acknowledged. This is evidenced by the steep rise in biochemical solutions to psychological problems under the auspices of the psychiatric institution (Davies, 2016, 2021). Consequently, psychiatric medicine, at least in practice, treats psychological ‘diseases’ as bio-physical processes with bio-physical remedies. Given psychiatrists will likely be the gatekeepers of psychedelics in health care it is vital to understand these implicit biochemical assumptions, as there is the risk of treatment being shaped by these brain-based accounts of mental illness (Dowie & Tempone-Wiltshire, 2022). This is problematic because reducing mental illness to abnormalities in underlying neurobiological systems results in explanations of causal mechanisms for change which are restricted to the resources of molecular biology. Exclusive focus upon biochemical mechanisms overlooks the fact that psychedelic agents achieve therapeutic change through the non-ordinary states of consciousness they induce. Furthermore, biochemical reductionism excludes the fact that the efficacy of these ethnomedicines is dependent upon the heavily ritualised and culturally-embedded containers in which they are utilised.

The broadly reductive and anti-environmental tradition of psychiatry, unduly bound as it is by an internalist conception of psyche as an ‘en-skulled’ event, would benefit from a modelling of pathology as not entirely explicable by recourse to biological processes taking place in the brain and nervous system. Incorporating into psychiatric practice insights from embodied cognition which understands mind as embedded, embodied, extended and enactive (Varela,



Thompson, & Rosch, 2017)—would potentially result in a more integrated and holistic uptake of psychedelic agents. This is as the bracketing off of an individual's social and material environment proves harmfully ignorant of pathologies co-arising in dependence with one's environmental scaffolding (Hutchins, 1995). As such a correct picture of causal explanation in psychological health inevitably involves environmental features (de Haan, 2020). This is to say the interdependence of person-in-environment challenges at its core the internalist thesis that psychiatric conditions are solely neurological disorders. We hold, alongside de Fuchs (2018, p.253), that no process of mental condition ought to be reduced to localized neural activities alone. Yet nonetheless, such biomedical ideological presuppositions continue to be enacted through various mechanisms of protection, surveillance, and control—alongside the bio-scientific 'management of the mind' and pharmacological industry (Phillips, 2009, 2013). It can be concluded that constructs of disease, illness, and treatment, are both heavily contested and dramatically shaped by value judgements, systems of influence and profit incentive. As such, further attention ought to be given to psychiatric influence upon the medical uptake of psychedelic agents. In what follows we will consider some of these influences upon therapeutic practice more broadly, and their implications for psychedelic-assisted therapy.

PSYCHOTHERAPY'S ASSIMILATION INTO THE CAPITALIST ORDER

Marcuse's hope was that psychedelic perception would counter repressive social tendencies, inducing revolutionary consciousness. Psychotherapy has historically also oriented towards addressing societally repressive tendencies. Despite this, many have viewed psychotherapy as failing to meet these revolutionary goals—as Hillman and Ventura (1992/2018) suggest in their titular epithet, we have had 100 years of psychotherapy and the world is getting worse. The authors of this work challenge the individualistic focus of traditional psychotherapy, oriented as it is towards individual healing and personal growth. They suggest that psychotherapy may serve to reinforce a narrow, self-centred worldview, to the exclusion of the broader socio-cultural and environmental factors shaping human experience—thereby unwittingly perpetuating the issues psychotherapy aims to alleviate. Hillman's critique then suggests that therapeutic work may, societally, serve primarily in lubricating the smooth-running of social institutions; maintaining workforce participation; and moving beyond endemic mental illness in order to achieve, at best, what Freud (1955) infamously termed a state of 'ordinary human unhappiness'. The reasonable concern that may be raised is that this will be the ill-fated future of psychedelics' clinical uptake as well.

This is not to deny that there are therapeutic modalities that orient explicitly towards revolutionary ends. Psychotherapy is not a monolithic entity, and encompasses various therapeutic approaches, some of which are explicitly aimed

at revolutionary consciousness. Indeed, we might situate Marcuse, with his combination of psychoanalytic ideas and critique of capitalist repressive tendencies, amongst just such aptly titled 'Freudian-Marxists' as Reich (1970), Fromm (1994), Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) and Sartre (1943, 1968). These thinkers variously sought to integrate the understandings of individual psychological processes and collective societal dynamics. Important therapeutic currents have emerged since which too orient towards revolutionary ambitions. Notably, figures such as Yalom (1980, 2008), Binswanger (1963) and Frankl (1985), in distinct ways, contribute an existential-phenomenological approach to revolutionary consciousness. This approach is grounded in consciousness-raising concerning core facets of the human condition. This humanistic exploration of anxiety, death, freedom, authenticity, and the search for meaning in life, bespeaks the desire to achieve revolutionary consciousness.

Such therapeutic modalities may be set against approaches within clinical psychology and biochemical psychiatry. While the former may orient towards social transformation, the latter, in focusing attention on the objectified individual, abstracts from his social reality, and aims to 'cure' him of 'symptoms' which are articulated in depoliticising medical terminology (Freshwater, 2003). Existential and psychoanalytic traditions may, by contrast, orient not simply towards alleviating symptomology but rather to understanding the individual as a 'split' subject—that is, one constituted from outside. In this way the individual is seen not as atom, but as interaction and process, constructed by his relations and therefore socio-political context. For instance, Hillman (1992), described above, proffered a Jungian psychoanalytic frame for psychotherapy, suggesting that beyond an approach to wellbeing grounded in personal healing and growth as isolates, what is called for is a broader reengagement with the world; a collective and ecological approach to therapy emphasising community interconnection and non-alienating participation in life. The manner in which psychotherapy may spark social revolution, through reconceptualising the psyche's relation to culture, is explored in Hillman's *Re-Visioning Psychology* (1975). Relatedly, we might consider Boss's *Daseinsanalysis*, a therapeutic methodology grounded in analysis of the lived experience of the individual in the world, and oriented towards the project of uncovering the deep meaning structures shaping that individual's life (Holzhey-Kunz, 2012). The goal of such methods focalises around an individual gaining transformative insight into their existence, addressing alienation and discovering greater purpose.

While existential psychotherapies may proffer frameworks for combatting alienation, the question to address is whether they prove resilient in the face of socioeconomic forces. Despite the orientation towards developing increasing self-awareness and authenticity—a number of issues constrain this ambition, issues that are paralleled within psychedelic psychotherapy. Particularly issues that arise concerning: the accessibility of existential approaches to the majority; the marginality of existential approaches in comparison to biomedical psychological orientations; and



the capacity of structural forces to override the intent of existential orientations (Tempone-Wiltshire & Dowie, 2023a, 2023b). Broader structural issues call for more direct redress. Psychedelic psychotherapy faces a further concern regarding *which* psychological methodologies and practitioners will be empowered to prescribe psychedelics or hold therapeutic sessions utilizing psychedelic agents.

PSYCHEDELICS AS NON-SPECIFIC AMPLIFIERS

We must conclude that, given the societal forces at play, psychedelics' capacity for catalysing significant change in perception is not *in itself* adequate to make them truly revolutionary. A change is not necessarily a change for the better. Indeed, when viewed as a 'non-specific amplifier' there is the potential to see psychedelic therapy as a dangerous form of social coercion. Pace and Devenot (2021) offer the compelling suggestion that the directionality of the radical shifts in political or religious belief structures, potentially precipitated by psychedelic usage, may be the product of contextual factors—set and setting—rather than the ineffable experience itself. Pace and Devenot evidence the possibility of psychedelics as 'politically pluripotent', that is as *non-specific amplifiers* that induce shifts in perception and thus ideological commitments. These authors illustrate this argument by drawing upon examples of situations in which psychedelics have been taken up by conservative public personalities, the corporate-psychedelic subculture, and neo-Nazi organisations: as technologies for justifying hierarchy-based, conservative ideologies and reinforcing capitalist systems of alienation. We are sympathetic to Pace and Devenot's conception of psychedelics as non-specific amplifiers and appreciate the dangers identified by the authors. As previously noted, the container for the psychedelic experience is vitally important, which is one of the reasons Indigenous technologies for the integration of such experiences are so valuable. Our intention in this article is to speak to some of the mechanisms by which psychedelics may precipitate a perceptual shift which combats modern alienation, without tying ourselves to specific political claims. There is more to be said about the interrelation between alienation and specific political ideologies, but that lies beyond the scope of this article.

Despite these important concerns which require redress, Marcuse believed in the potential of psychedelics to achieve change for the better. Even should psychedelics prove pluripotent, he believed that, if utilised with revolutionary aims in mind, they could serve as powerful instruments of the good; combating the prevalence of mechanistic linear thinking patterns that fail to engage with the complexity inherent to societal systems. Such linear thinking induces false consciousness that is antithetical to revolutionary action. Socio-political transformation calls for not only such bidirectionality, but broad ecological systems thinking; that is inter- or trans- systemic approaches to complex problems (Capra & Luisi, 2014).

Nonetheless, *how* the introduction of psychedelics in clinical settings may induce expansion in consciousness, and *whether* such expansions are sufficient to induce systemic change is a difficult equation to compute. When seeking to understand the causal ramifications of psychedelic psychotherapy we are required to engage with layered non-linear algorithms for modelling influence between complex adaptive systems, like human beings, existing within complex adaptive systems of social organisation, like societies. Determination of the revolutionary potential of psychedelic agents requires a fuller ethnographic inquiry into the different facets of the psychedelic renaissance: that is, both its institutionally sanctioned clinical uptake and wider cultural engagement. This includes engagement with the role of psychedelic usage within the wider political praxis of certain subcultures, the nature of the therapeutic industry, and the value sets possessed by psychedelic-assisted therapists. Such data gathering is still in its infancy; and yet this engagement with what is happening on the ground will constitute the real testing place, concerning whether the radical change to an individual's interiority occasioned by psychedelics may serve as a complement to the macro-scale structural change required to achieve real societal transformation. We will expand the socio-political frame around these ethnographic questions in the following section.

THE MYTH OF CHEMICAL EMANCIPATION

In considering psychedelics' clinical uptake as a potentially revolutionary agent, it is important to recognise that medical institutions have historically existed in perverse alliance with economic ideological power structures (Foucault, 1976). For the psychedelic experience to be 'filtered' through a monetized medical system is to subject the experience to the instrumental logic of the institution and its implicit power structures. The health industry, informed as it by such hegemonic discourse, will be prone to co-opting psychedelic substances towards productivist ends; thereby compromising their emancipatory potential (Davies, 2017). Thus, in bringing psychedelic substances into the medical fold, we are left asking whether the psychedelic experience will be instrumentalised as merely a means of sustaining an alienating system of power? *Chemical emancipation*, through mind-altering substances, may be a construct created and manipulated by businesses to reproduce the social body dictated by capital. Even liberation becomes a saleable product.

It is apparent how, when separated from disciplined political organisation, and oriented solely towards personal goals—pleasure, novelty, productivity, or health—such chemically-induced alterations in perception may be readily inserted into a commodity system. Psychedelics, on this picture, merely constitute modes of withdrawal into an artificial paradise *within* society, rather than constituting technologies for the radical transformation *of* societies, via the production of a new sensibility or *new rationality*, in Marcuse's terms (1969, p. 37). This critique mirrors Freud's



suggestion that psychoactive agents were best understood as ‘narcotics’ that induce anaesthetic qualities that lead one to dissociate from reality by withdrawing into a walled garden.

Much in the way that distrust of SSRI’s was raised by second-wave feminists concerning their utilisation as technologies for suppressing the discontent of housewives in the nuclear suburbs across the United States, a similar concern may be levelled at using psychedelics as anti-depressant medication to placate discontent while in no way addressing underlying systemic conditions (Davies, 2021). Indeed, psychedelics may merely offer the latest instantiation of the contemporary mania for pharmaceutical interventions—apparent from the use of pharmaceuticals to medicate children for Oppositional Defiant Disorders, or Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, themselves most likely symptoms not merely of genetic inheritance but also of systemic and cultural issues (Maté, 2011; McGonigle, 2018). In this way, psychedelic medicalisation may serve to merely stabilise the individual within society, in order to maintain the fluent operation of established institutions.

The economic de-politicization of mental illness has meant structural issues have been plastered over with cultural narratives that encourage self-pathologizing alongside pharmaceutical dependence. We have seen the regulation of human behaviour, will and self-conception by an unholy triad—socio-political, biochemical and market force (Davies, 2021). In contemporary settings an instantiation of this trend in relation to psychedelics is apparent in the emerging culture of *micro-dosing*, whereby psychedelic substances are taken in minor quantities in order to induce flow states and thereby increase productivity and work efficiency: a practice made infamously popular by tech start-ups in Silicon Valley (Tvorun-Dunn, 2022). Beyond the appropriating of psychedelics for productivity gain we must also consider the use of psychedelics in regimes of ‘self-care’.

PSYCHEDELICS ASSIMILATION INTO REGIMES OF SELF CARE

It is an important point worth acknowledging that psychedelic experiences are profoundly constituted by the social and cultural context in which they are utilised. Gearin and Devenot (2021) draw upon illustrations of recent popular media associated with the re-medicalization of psychedelics to naturalise a neoliberal political orientation as pharmacological and healthy. Davies (2021) has expanded on this notion, by describing the way in which recent decades have seen health increasingly defined less in terms of wellbeing and more in terms of economic productivity—a trend, Gearin and Devenot suggest, that is extending into psychedelic psychotherapy. Thus, while psychedelic research may present itself as amoral and objective, in practice science will frequently revert to moral and political claims in public discourse. One illustration concerns medicalization.

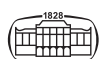
Through ‘medicalization’, and medical creep, ever more facets of the human condition are reduced to medical

problems (Conrad, 2013). An illustrative example is the way that the pharmacological-informed psychedelic research agenda is currently driving the medicalization of ethno-medicines. This is the dark underside of the treatment of psychedelic-psychotherapy as a *panacea*, anticipated to treat a range of problems from treatment-resistant depression to personality disorders. This has led not only to the defining of human conditions in medical terms, but additionally to the tight definition of the substances as *merely* medicines: that is, the radical changes to consciousness, or existential ‘realisations’ psychedelics induce, are rendered down to biochemical events in a medical register.

Importantly, attention ought to be given to the ways in which the medical sciences may unwittingly conspire with systems of control to foster the belief that it is the individual at fault; and that wellbeing comes from disciplining and acclimatising oneself to one’s existential lot in order to better comply with societal expectations. Our dominant capitalist cultural ideals place heavy emphasis on individualization and self-focused behaviour. As a result, even activities that are beneficial to human wellbeing have been reframed as devices for self-care or personal development.

Recent years have seen critical attention paid to the rise of the corporate ‘mindfulness’ mentality. Purser’s (2019) critique of ‘McMindfulness’ contends that mindfulness, traditionally oriented towards the Buddhist soteriological goal of awakening, has in a Western neoliberal context become the new capitalist spirituality, in which vague conceptions of self-care and self-improvement have come to replace the ethical and metaphysical dimensions of meditative practice. A defining characteristic of modernity, under neoliberalism, are the ongoing cycles of decontextualization, driven by globalisation and industrialisation, for the purpose of monetization (Eriksen, 2014). When something is disembedded, it is moved from a concrete, tangible, local context to an abstract or virtual state. In stripping psychedelics, and other cultural contemplative technologies in this way, we lose the framework which makes these technologies meaningful in the first place—the heart of the tradition (Gleig, 2019).

Zizek (2001) famously contends that such decontextualised Buddhist meditative practice may be appropriated in service of the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism; providing as it does the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. The widespread uptake of psychedelics may anticipate the same fate. While non-Western contemplative technologies, such as mindfulness or somatic embodiment practices, have in recent years been drawn into the clinical fold, this has unsurprisingly occurred in a highly individualistic and atomised fashion. Should we seek an avenue to conceive of psychedelics as having revolutionary potential we need to be aware of the pitfalls that have befallen many other contemplative technologies for insight. Traditionally utilised for collective, ritualised, and formalised, transcendent encounters, they have been turned towards enhancing individual productivity.



By redirecting culpability for unhappiness and unproductiveness onto the individual, mental illness is particularized out of the political sphere, and issues that are structural in nature are plastered over with cultural narratives that encourage self-pathologization alongside pharmaceutical dependence. These narratives developed not primarily in service of human welfare, but instead the economic interests of pharmaceutical companies. We have seen the regulation of human behaviour, will, and self-conception by what might be termed an unholy triad—socio-political, biochemical, and market forces. Increasingly, attention is being given to the role of neoliberalism in the commodification of mental health (Esposito & Perez, 2014) alongside a recognition of neoliberalism's mutually supporting relationship with the psycho-pharmaceutical industry (Davies, 2017). The result is that existential conditions of alienation and their corollary states of melancholia, discontent, and desperation often go unacknowledged and misdiagnosed as clinical conditions—major depression, anxiety or personality disorders etcetera (Brüne, 2007). Dreyfus (1976) incisively captured this problem nearly 50 years ago, when he wrote:

The ultimate form of alienation in our society is not repression and exclusion of the truth but rather the constitution of the individual subject as the locus of pathology.... All forms of psychotherapy can at best provide only isolated and temporary *cures* (p. xxxvii).

This passage speaks to the fact that there is a general malaise that therapeutic modalities fail to combat, even as they attempt to remedy individual problems. This general malaise is evident in the psychiatric sciences' pervasive failure to counteract the rise in alienation and individualisation, dominant under modern-day capitalist society. Importantly this passage speaks to the *potential* for the misuse of, particularly *medicalised*, forms of psychological practices as a means of perpetuating false consciousness by disciplining individuals into controlling, regulating and indeed constituting their needs in relation to the alienating systems which govern them. As such, when turning attention towards psychedelic psychotherapy, self-care and self-transformation of the privileged in the global north, attention is displaced from the overarching socio-political and economic realities that are the true drivers of ecological disconnection. This critique of 'perceptual revolution' sidelining real world action generalises; indeed, as Månsson (2021) notes, attention to the environmental degradation and socio-political injustices wrought through the unbridled power of corporate megaliths may also be side-lined through such misplaced attention.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE

The appropriation of psychedelics either into regimes of self-care, or towards the ends of productivity gain, are both instances of psychedelic commodification. We will consider in more specificity how the ideological and material tensions

inherent in capitalism will shape the clinical uptake of psychedelic substances. To begin with, there is compelling reason to believe that material requirements for capitalism's economic structure to reproduce itself will inevitably shape the clinical uptake of psychedelics within the medical system. That is, the commodification, or co-option, of psychedelic experience, is a natural aspect of the acculturation process within our economic system. Under capital, this process of co-option is ubiquitous. Indeed, with the integration of psychedelic technologies into a Western paradigm we are seeing the rise of forms of neo-shamanism, alongside the emergence of discourse surrounding both clinical and self-optimisation oriented psychedelic usage. This may appear, as Cox (2021) suggests, dangerously reminiscent of colonization; that is, the globalised extraction of resources—natural and cultural—from Indigenous peoples. It is important, when meeting the psychedelic renaissance, to be conscious of colonial habits that may risk replicating historic harms and injustices (Ens, 2021; Romero, 2022).

It may be argued, then, that the commodification that characterises modernity will inevitably usurp psychedelics for non-revolutionary ends such as increased productivity gain. Consequently, psychedelics may cease to constitute a mode of meaningful resistance against capital's alienating influence. As such, even should psychedelic experience have the potential to serve as a catalyst for revolution against societal structures, prevailing economic forces may inhibit or reverse this potential. In better elucidating the integration of psychedelics into the capitalist order we must characterise the various ways in which the extraordinary experiences occasioned by psychedelic substances may be instrumentalised, and the Indigenous knowledge systems that evolved in relation to these substances appropriated, for commercial gain. It is important to note, nonetheless, that the co-option of technologies valuable to human flourishing in service of what is oppressive is not, in and of itself, an argument against the possibility that psychedelics may still serve more socially transformative, or revolutionary ends. Nonetheless it does identify and speak to problematic aspects of appropriation and instrumentalisation.

To properly understand the motor driving the machinery of appropriation we must consider how a natural consequence of capitalist economic drivers is cyclical expansion (Piketty, 2017). In light of such expansion, capitalism requires the continual appearance and re-emergence of new and innovative commodities and cultural imaginaries, to both act as a distraction in service of false consciousness, and to provide ever new exciting experiences to be fetishised for consumption, thereby driving economic growth metrics (Konings, 2015). On such a reading, psychedelics will not only inevitably be subject to depoliticization, but also help inject the required novelty to continue veiling the underlying ideological drivers and petrification of the economic structure. Indeed, the clinical uptake of psychedelics as 'magic bullets' to cure all ailments shows they are already being utilized in providing false novelty. This hyperbolic description can be understood as the latest instantiation of capitalism's unquenchable need for a cutting



edge ‘cure all’. Psychedelics have been touted by some as a panacea, capable of curing anything; from cancer to depression, from compromised immune function to relational difficulties (Maté, 2021). Such a framing of psychedelics not only serves capitalism’s need for cyclical expansion through commodity fetishism; it also elides systemic causes of human ailments, further depoliticising our understanding of mental distress.

Whilst viewing psychedelics as a panacea may serve capitalism through producing a fetishisable commodity, that does not preclude psychedelics in fact having a broad spectrum of applications. Furthermore, we have reason to believe that psychedelics’ mechanism of action may be potentially revolutionary or paradigm-shifting in the field of health care. That is, psychedelics pose a tacit challenge to the biomedical model of health and mind-body relation. As described, the mechanism of therapeutic benefit for psychedelics depends upon the insights into self, via direct perception of unconscious processes. Such a mechanism of action profoundly challenges the bio-medical reductionism and pharmaceutical dependence deficit models that govern the medical paradigm (Holst, 2020). As such, there is the potential that psychedelics may challenge health care assumptions, contesting the dominance of the pharmaceutical industrial complex, as well as the capitalist incentivisation of productivity in service of the ubiquitous profit motive. This speaks to one way in which psychedelics may challenge the productivist paradigm: see our forthcoming response to Hauskeller’s work on *Psychedelics and Critical Theory* (Tempono-Wiltshire & Dowie, 2023a, 2023b).

In brief, in that work, we examine Hauskeller’s (Hauskeller & Sjöstedt-Hughes, 2022) critique of the scientific and political economy that continues to shape the psychedelic renaissance. She argues that in misconstruing socio-political-cultural malaise as individual illness, the medicalization of psychedelics ignores the systemic problems that lead to individual malaise and alienation. It may be contended, then, that the structures resulting in alienation, and leading individuals to seek psychedelic psychotherapy, are the very structures that constrain and prevent the liberatory potential of psychedelic substances more generally. This is an important concern to raise, as whilst unaddressed the psychedelic renaissance may simply constitute the latest means of bypassing structural problematics.

In light of this concern, it is important to speak to the way in which commodity fetishism extends beyond consumable items to include also experiences, ideological value-sets and identity markers. Debord’s (2021) *Society of the Spectacle* examines the phenomenon that under capital, authentic social life is replaced with its representation. Indeed, he suggests that history of social life can be understood as “the decline of being into having and having into merely appearing” (p. 95). This is present in *green washing* or *rainbow capitalism*: the use of misleading environmental and sustainability claims, or equity-oriented claims respectively, to market consumable goods. The argument may be run that this is present, also, in the *psychedelic renaissance*; to market ‘self-actualisation’. Curtis’s documentary *Hyper*

Normalisation illustrates the way in which, incapable of addressing the cultural malaise generated by impersonal market forces, individuals, left structurally impotent, turn their focus towards ‘self-improvement’ in order to attain an *impression* of self-autonomy or actualisation. Curtis symbolises this process of false consciousness with an image of Jane Fonda in figure-hugging latex ‘dancercising’ in aerobic workout videos from the 1980s. It may as readily be illustrated by an image of minimum wage alienated workers forgetting their troubles at a psychedelic bush doof, or a disenchanting middle-manager attending a clinical psychedelic-assisted therapy session. In this way psychedelic uptake may engender a surrender in the face of impermeable market forces.

As Marcuse writes, “Today’s rebels want to see, hear, feel new things in a new way: they link liberation with the dissolution of ordinary and orderly perception” (Marcuse, 1976, p. 12). Yet the dissolution of orderly perception does not in itself achieve liberatory goals. A tie-dye shirt does not demark membership of the hippie movement and does not carry within it the intrinsic human relationships that engagement with community entail. Still, capital produces such shirts, and other psychedelic paraphernalia, at scale with the intent of selling counter-cultural communities as a product. The subversion of psychedelic culture, when it is scaled, is thus a likely outcome within the spectacular society. As a consequence, when psychedelic substances, traditionally embedded as Indigenous ethnomedicines in ritualised settings or otherwise serving as counter-cultural agents, are reduced to ready-made commodities, the revolutionary potential of such substances may be neutered, as a pandemic of tie-dye shirts is unlikely to constitute a revolutionary force. Debord (2021) asserts that it is the spectacle itself which prevents individuals from recognising that the society of the spectacle is only a moment in history that may be overturned through revolution. An argument might be run, however, that while the impoverishment specific to the spectacular society takes the form of inauthenticity and the distortion of human perceptions, it is just such perceptual distortions that psychedelics bring to light. Indeed, should psychedelics illuminate such culturally imputed perceptual distortions, via the mechanisms described herein, then psychedelics would constitute a valuable revolutionary agent.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the socially transformative potential of psychedelic substances requires a fuller engagement with the ways capital incentivises forms of alienation, appropriation and commodification. We have explored the potential for these systems of control to neuter the revolutionary potential of both clinical and widespread psychedelic uptake. Under capital, psychedelics may be instrumentalised as merely the latest means of maintaining the fluent operation of established institutions by: regulating individuals into unjust systems of oppression; redirecting medical and



therapeutic goals towards profit and productivity; distracting or diverting attention from systemic forms of control; usurping non-ordinary states into the blinkered domain of individual self-care; fetishistically commodifying psychedelic experience into an experiential consumable; and marketing ‘self-actualisation’ as a mere status symbol. In each of these ways psychedelics may be utilised by the capitalist economic structure in the service of control and distraction, thereby neutering any revolutionary potential these substances hold.

Nonetheless, we suggest there are important counter-hegemonic roles that psychedelics may play. Psychedelics have the potential to induce the non-ordinary states of perception necessary to raise individuals’ consciousness surrounding structurally alienating conditions. Psychedelics may achieve this consciousness raising by: perceptual experiences that provoke alternative epistemologies and metaphysics, thereby challenging the paradigmatic assumptions of present day mechanistic industrial society; expanding constructions of self-hood and thereby offering resignifications of meanings, desires, and life potentials; and finally, offering the enriched phenomenological insight into self, other, and world called for in combating the ubiquitous alienation experienced under capital. In this way, psychedelics may induce the revolution in perception necessary to imagine liberatory potentials and spark the desire for collective emancipation.

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