THE MYSTICAL IS POLITICAL: FESTIVAL CROWDS, PEER HARM-REDUCTION AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE

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Oh, is this the way they say the future’s meant to feel
Or just 20,000 people standing in a field?
Pulp, ‘Sorted for E’s and Wizz’

Music festivals (especially those in electronic dance music) represent some of our culture’s closest approaches to the liminal: in Victor Turner’s work, an in-between state created through ritual practices in a consecrated space, perhaps reached via a pilgrimage or by crossing a symbolic threshold. People come to the liminal space to be transformed – to move from one state of being to another – and to experience
unusual states of consciousness, including the sense of being apart from everyday space and time (Turner, 1969). Often this sense is boosted by psychedelic use. Psychedelic harm reduction organisations run by peers within festival subcultures provide sanctuary spaces, information and support with the aim that this might take place in the least damaging way possible.

However, the otherworld of the festival is not truly apart from the world and its laws. Peer harm reduction projects face challenges in their relations with festival organisers and law enforcement, within the dominant cultural narrative of prohibition and its attendant conspiracies of silence – for a first-hand account, see Ponté (2012).

The festivals counter the narratives of mainstream culture, to a greater or lesser extent, with their own professed politics and ideologies. These are often utopian in character, or rather heterotopian, creating a neutral space in which a patchwork of experimental ideas and ideals can jostle alongside each other (StJohn, 2001). Recurring themes include leftist politics and anarchism; environmentalism and sustainability; alternative spirituality; and a DIY ethos in which participation is preferred to being a spectator.

Thus politics and spirituality are often mingled, and inform each other, within the experience of a festival. However, what scholarship there is on the dance festival – apart from the body of work within the discipline of tourism studies and event management, which is beyond the scope of this paper – has tended to focus either on its political status or its place in modern-day practices of spirituality. In this paper I will examine ways in which these two themes intersect, with particular reference to the role of psychedelics and harm reduction in this process.

THEORY OF THE FESTIVAL

One body of theory on the festival with roots in anthropology, whose key proponent is Graham St John (2001), draws strongly on Turner and Van Gennep and focuses on its spiritual and ritual aspects, while also somewhat acknowledging its political side. In contrast, the other,
springing from Birmingham-School-style cultural studies, seems largely unaware of the spirituality-focused work and instead concerns itself with the question of whether dance subcultures (and thus festivals in passing) have a distinct politics at all, generally concluding that they do not. In some formulations, their political expressions are said to be incoherent; Gilbert and Pearson (1999) point out that ravers have yet to approach the government with ‘a clearly articulated list of basic political demands’. Alternatively, ideals are present but unstable: things of the moment which do not survive removal from the club or the festival site. Sarah Thornton (1994) cautions us not to confuse momentary feelings of dancefloor empowerment with ‘substantive political rights and freedoms’. Finally, some theorists find no political meaning in dance culture at all. Reynolds (2012) describes the Thatcherist principles of consumption and entrepreneurship motivating early rave event promoters, suggesting that something fundamentally apolitical lies at its core.

Some early theories of ritual could be seen as support for this. Through its very isolation from the social structure the liminal space is said to reinforce the status quo, by making it even less imaginable to break the rules elsewhere or at other times. Meanwhile, while participants are in an open, accepting state of mind, the authorities take the opportunity to inculcate dominant cultural values (Turner, 1969).

However, liminality is also bound up with communitas, an experience of blissful mass unity in which participants feel at one with their community and by extension with all of humanity. Communitas is not inherently radical. In fact, Turner states that societies need it, and the social inversions and play of carnival, in order to remain stable (Turner, 1987). Nonetheless, communitas may take on a quality of radicalism in societies which no longer offer many legitimate opportunities for it.

Whether visiting and sharing supplies with neighbouring camps in Black Rock City, dancing to psytrance at a crowded outdoor stage, or taking part in open rituals like the fire ceremonies of Sunrise Celebration, many festivalgoers experience a communitarianism which is in short supply in the ‘real world’. Gardner (2004) found bluegrass enthusiasts saw festivals as an escape from the isolation of their everyday lives. In festival
crowds, people can experience ‘collective effervescence’, a concept originated by Durkheim to describe the effect of large-scale cultural rituals but applied by Michel Maffesoli to the exuberant sociality associated with being part of a fluid ‘neo-tribe’ connected by shared emotion (Maffesoli, 1996).

Many view this communal quality as specific to the festival time and space. However, it may contain the possibility of wider social change, especially when psychedelic experiences and the option of a sanctuary space to assist with them are added to the mix. This social impact is not dependent on the existence of an explicit political manifesto. It can take nothing more specific than a deeply felt and lived experience of being part of a collective to cause lasting change in the nature of one’s connections with others and with society. However, the strength of this effect is modulated by the kind and circumstances of the experiences, and the extent to which we integrate them into our consciousness – a process in which psychedelic harm reduction can play a crucial role.

THE PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE, INTEGRATION AND POLITICS

Disciplines running the gamut from neuroscience to anthropology are currently presenting new theories on how psychedelics function. Robin Carhart-Harris’s studies of psilocybin using an MRI scanner (Carhart-Harris, 2013) conclude that the psychedelic state is one defined by greater suggestibility than normal consciousness, along with less sense of separateness between concepts or brain states (and thus, perhaps, between self and other). This can result in positive experiences involving ‘magical thinking’ and a benign, hopeful, perhaps utopian worldview, or negative, paranoid experiences that mimic psychosis – a clear demonstration of the importance of the right set and setting.

Other research by Carhart-Harris with David Nutt and the Beckley Foundation indicates that this suggestibility may have a mechanism similar to Aldous Huxley’s ‘reducing valve’ theory about the effects of mescaline in The Doors of Perception (Huxley, 1954): decreased blood
flow to areas of the brain acting as ‘connector hubs’ seemed to suppress their usual ‘censoring activity’, allowing for new patterns of thought (Eatinger, 2013).

With reduced access to our everyday schema of the world which filter sensory input based on past experience, new models of self and other may have the opportunity to develop. Echenhofer’s research on ayahuasca drinkers resulted in his ‘creative cycle processes model’: a common pattern in the ayahuasca experience in which a dissolution of the self and its assumptions (often traumatic) is experienced, followed by the creation of new self-concepts and/or views of the world, concluding with the integration of these new models into the self as a whole (‘vertical integration’) and then into the subject’s concept of the world (‘lateral integration’) (Echenhofer, 2012).

We must be wary of what Letcher (2013) calls the “common core model” of mysticism, a tendency to focus on common cross-cultural (and cross-substance) themes at the expense of awareness of cultural diversity and the sheer bewildering variety of psychedelic experience. That said, Echenhofer’s study, the psilocybin research of Griffiths et al. (2006, 2008), and many first-hand accounts do seem to exhibit a common thread: a trajectory towards a sense of interconnectedness or consolidation, especially if the experience is allowed to run its course in a supportive setting. However, a similarly prominent theme is a period of dissolution, fragmentation or isolation early in the experience, corresponding to Echenhofer’s stage of schema breakdown – a period which can be painful or difficult.

I contend that working through, or bypassing entirely, this isolating stage and arriving at the stage of integration and interconnectedness – with or without assistance – can be transformative not only personally but politically. This is because such a state of consciousness runs dramatically counter to cultural narratives deeply embedded in, and helping to perpetuate, Western neoliberal society.
NEOLIBERALISM AND THE FEAR OF CROWDS

After 21 people were suffocated in a crowd at the Duisburg Love Parade in 2010, Luis-Manuel García (2011) studied the online reaction to the disaster. He wrote:

“Numerous commentators on the web... seemed to be coming to the same conclusion: there’s something intrinsically wrong with large crowds, and by extension there’s something wrong with people who are drawn to them.”

(García, 2011)

The commentators in his analysis constantly invoked the loss of the rational self and the return to a bestial nature thought to be inherent in participation in a crowd, using phrases like ‘lizard brain’, ‘herd animal’, ‘knee-jerk’, and so on. People who voluntarily engaged with large crowds were looked at suspiciously; as another of the web commenters put it, “You know, you could have the same dancing, love, drugs, and whatever in the comfort of your own home with friends” (ibid.)

The comments on a recent pro-communitarian article by Giles Fraser in the Guardian (Fraser, 2013) have a similar tone, identifying communitarianism variously with terrorism, fascism, Soviet gulags and Stalin’s purges. Not only the ‘herds’ and ‘mobs’ of festival crowds but any large groups of people are portrayed as inherently dangerous.

This currently pervasive attitude, suggesting that people need to be insulated from each other for fear of a conflagration, is a relatively recent invention. According to García (2011), the pathologising view of crowds originated in late 1800s sociology, but was immediately embraced by opponents of universal suffrage (“why leave the nation in the hands of an ‘electoral mob’ when an elite aristocracy could handle it with cool professionalism?”).

The neoliberal elites of today also find it convenient. García quotes Mazzarella: crowds are ‘the past of the (neo)liberal democracies of the global North’, a past they wish to distance themselves from (ibid.). A salient feature of neoliberalism is its tendency to fragment communities and isolate individuals. Purcell et al. (2010) document Thatcher’s efforts
to create a ‘mobile workforce’ by weakening community and extended family ties so that individuals would be free to move to wherever jobs happened to be. Gill (2009) shows how marketisation and emphasis on competition among academics has undermined solidarity and isolated them from each other, while Ehrenreich (2005) describes how neoliberal attitudes to self-actualisation in the job market serve elites by masking wider social inequalities.

Whatever it stems from and whoever it really serves, fear of collective experience is deeply embedded in our current cultural narrative. Terry Wassall (2010) writes of neoliberalism that it so permeates all aspects of our lives as to make alternatives unimaginable. Left-wing thinkers’ proposed solutions are still founded on neoliberal assumptions about the meanings of freedom, choice, commodities and markets. Similarly, fear of crowds appears as common sense: avoid them or risk losing your mind.

THE POSITIVE CROWD EXPERIENCE

In all of this condemnation, the idea that there are positive kinds of crowd experience is rarely put forward, though festivalgoers, free partiers and clubbers experience them on a regular basis. However, Garcia (2011) describes a benign sort of ego dissolution:

“One of the possible pleasures of partying in a crowd is the sensation of coming undone, of feeling your sense of a bounded, unitary self unravel and fray at the edges. For some people, this sense of being temporarily relieved from the compulsion to be a consistent, coherent subject can feel like total bliss.”

This, he writes, cannot be achieved in small groups:

“Part of the experience of being in a crowd [is] about the sheer thrill of feeling one’s affects and emotions being mirrored, amplified, and circulated a thousandfold”

The mindless automaton figure described by the pathologising view
of crowds seems to be an unhelpful caricature. All the same, it would appear that to some extent being in a crowd does constitute an altered state of consciousness in its own right. The quote above about the dissolution of self and the mirroring of mood and gesture parallels Carhart-Harris’s description of the psychedelic state (Carhart-Harris, 2013). Even in the admittedly unlikely event of unanimous sobriety, festive crowds are liable to be high in openness and suggestibility, and low on ego boundaries. This invites speculation as to how the effect might be boosted if many in the crowd were also on psychedelics.

One of my interview participants in a small study on extraordinary and spiritual experience at festivals (Ruane, 2011) gave me this account of a unitive experience:

“And I’m sat on the edge of the crowd at the back of the tent, and I could feel all this energy going through me and I could see all these webs of light everywhere... like, where everyone was and where they’d been and where they were going... just this feeling that everything really is connected and everything really is made of energy.”  

(KP)

Though she had taken a small dose of a psychedelic the previous day, KP stated she was not under the influence when this occurred. Instead, her account foregrounds the effect of being in an ecstatic crowd: the collective experience itself as consciousness alterant.

THE ROLE OF HARM REDUCTION

Festivals are for many the best available setting for such experiences, but they can also be chaotic, unpredictable, and prey to the whims of weather, along with the risks attendant on becoming disinhibited and vulnerable among strangers, not all of whom have good intentions. Under these circumstances, the consolidation phase of the psychedelic experience may be difficult to reach. Enter harm reduction services, which aim to provide at least one place on site where the environment is favourable.

In one welfare worker’s experience, general awareness that there is a
sanctuary tent on site leads to fewer people having the sort of problems which might cause them to need one:

"...we're a safety net. If you're teaching somebody how to do circus skills and they're learning how to walk a tightrope, you put a safety net underneath, and that gives people the confidence to walk across that rope without ever falling into the safety net"  (Bill)

We now consider those who do make use of the safety net. The peer harm reduction group Kosmicare UK has kindly allowed me access to five years of their records. They contain many examples of psychedelic experiences moving from isolation to integration under their supervision: from those of mythic, archetypal proportions (for example: a woman who said she had 'lost the light'; a man who believed he was in hell and worked through the experience with the facilitators until they arrived at a different narrative of reliving and releasing past traumas) to more simple and practical examples of disconnection (a young man who was convinced he had wandered into a completely different festival). Kosmicare UK visitors are sometimes initially unwilling to come to the service for help due to a sense of 'not belonging'. In many of the cases this is said to transmute into integration and belonging – most strikingly in the case of a young woman, at first afraid to enter the space, who ended up acting out a psychodrama in which she asked the two facilitators to stand in for her parents so that she could begin to voice long-repressed issues.

Another account from my extraordinary experience interview project (Ruane, 2011) shows the isolation-integration trajectory from the point of view of a harm reduction service user. The participant was alone at a large festival in Europe and had taken LSD:

"I saw the whole majesty of the universe, just laid out above me, and the tiniest tiny specks saying 'You are here, and you're all alone!'...
And so I retreated [to the sanctuary tent... that was like having a year's worth of psychotherapy in one night, it was exactly what I needed... I didn't feel like I fitted into the space of the festival as a
whole, or like I belonged there. Whereas at that moment, I very much fitted into the purpose of the sanctuary tent, and therefore – that’s where I went.”

So what are the long-term results of a successfully integrated psychedelic experience? Griffiths’ follow-up study on his psilocybin participants (Griffiths, 2008) found them to score higher than initial pre-study tests on a battery of measures of well-being 14 months after the initial study. MacLean et al. found long-term change in the fundamental personality trait of openness, a depth of change almost unknown in adulthood (MacLean, 2011). Tramacchi (2004) found that in many cultures psychedelic rituals seemed to lead both to an enhanced sense of self and to stronger bonds with the community. Transpersonal therapist Renn Butler says of those who have undergone a full mystical experience that they exhibit “critical attitudes towards the abuse of power... higher responsibility, positive ethics, and utmost respect for life” (Butler, 2009).

Butler implies a common ideology inherent to the psychedelic experience. Other commentators might disagree, finding such experiences to be wildly varied or simply indescribable. However, integrated unitive experiences can be seen as inherently political acts merely by virtue of running counter to, and suggesting alternatives to, the all-consuming dogma of isolation – however ineffable or resistant to analysis the core of the experience may be. Furthermore, awareness of interconnectedness is political in that it encourages thought about the systems in which one is embedded and the power dynamics at play within them.

In addition, the recent research on psychedelics discussed above suggests that, by loosening the hold of schema on our thinking, they may help solve the problem previously pointed out by Wassall (2010) by making it easier to think the normally unthinkable. Adams describes how use of psychedelics can promote an understanding of processes of schismogenesis – the rifts that develop between society and its ‘others’, for example disaffected youth (Adams, 2014). This effect is far from guaranteed: Riley et al. (2010) showed how neoliberal philosophies
persisted, competing with discourses of connectedness, in the talk of a
group of magic mushroom users. However, at the very least, experiences
of communal festivity while in a state of psychedelic openness offer a
chance to perceive and criticise forms of social disconnection normally
taken for granted.

CONCLUSION

The spiritual and political approaches to festival theory, far from being
separate, can be viewed as intricately interwoven. Positive experiences
both among crowds and of crowds, at a time when the mind is amenable
to new schema, have the potential for lasting change not just of the
individual but of how they relate to others and perceive their place in the
social world – in a way which may not be achievable in a therapist’s office
or in the comfort of one’s own home.

Some of the current discourse on the benefits of psychedelics seeks to
draw a bright line between therapeutic/clinical and recreational use, and
to distance itself from recreational use, presenting it as damaging and
chaotic. However, aside from the fact that in the absence of regulated
use, recreational settings are for many the only point of access to the
therapeutic modalities of these substances, experiences in recreational
settings have their own value and social significance. They are not
cleanly separable from therapeutic use, and othering these users and
their practices in search of legitimacy would be regrettable.

In the meantime, let us return to the stated remit of harm reduction:
to reduce the risk of drug-taking behaviours. Accordingly, it behoves
us to provide support through which as many of these experiences as
possible can safely run their course rather than being arrested at the
fragmentation/isolation phase. The emergent effects on society might
surprise us.

www.opendemocracy.net/cameron-adams/psychedelics-and-shadows-of-society-0 [Accessed
February 27, 2014].


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