



AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

Psychedelic Justice: Toward a diverse and equitable psychedelic culture

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BOOK REVIEW



Psychedelic Justice presents a powerful community of voices lesser heard, and commands our attention, persuades us to action. The central thesis carries a cautionary tale – that if we are not careful, we may find ourselves simply following the same-old patterns of perpetuating harm, and systemic oppression, no matter how “good” our intentions, or how “noble” the pursuit – our revolution of spiritual enlightenment, healing, a better way of being in the world through altered states of consciousness.

With the re-emergence of psychedelics into mainstream Western consciousness, the ‘renaissance’ for all its noble vision, suffers a potential for the arrogance of ignorance. Many in the community fear that to date, the underground has avoided trappings of modern capitalism, Western medicalization, and other communally distasteful dominant cultural attitudes – but this may change, and perhaps that change is running away with us... fast. Here the authors and editors alike excel, in their collective abilities to bring together the myriad of considerations, woven around common threads, acknowledging the struggle for a prioritization of efforts of collective action that will have meaningful impact, and yet without the sense of overwhelm that usually accompanies the consideration of large scale complex world-changing problems. The work embodies Haraway sense of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) and makes visible the conflict, the cognitive dissonance in considering design of what was borne a revolutionary movement, now somehow graduating into a stark world of problems without simple idealistic answers.

Psychedelic Justice comprises a collection of essays from multiple authors, diverse in their backgrounds, expertise, and perspective – galvanized through the dimension of activism. Divided into six sections, readers are invited to explore various aspects of collective action in the field: (1) Inclusion, diversity, and equity; (2) Perspectives on cultural appropriation, colonialism, and globalization of plant medicines; (3) Psychedelics and Western Culture; (4) Queer; (5) Sex and Power; and (6) Sustainability, Policy, and Reciprocity. Each layer unearths new meaning, expands our compassion, offers new doorways to slide through worlds outside our own direct experience. We find ourselves archeologists carefully brushing away the silt to see the bones – and hoping we won’t commit the ultimate sin of displacing such precious findings out of context in a darkened museum archive, alone, vulnerable, rendered sterile for want of clinging to a singular “truth”.

Much of the current literature around social justice within the psychedelic sphere is focused on decriminalization and accessibility of these ‘new’ therapies, particularly for minority groups. *Psychedelic Justice* moves beyond this conversation, steps deliberately into the deeper roots of the psychedelic movement, and a grounding in the belief systems which perpetuate harm against marginalized populations. The authors call for a more equitable world through awareness, understanding, and diligence in addressing the unconscious bias that plagues us – recognition of alternative ways of knowing; dismantling traditional power dynamics that perpetuate systemic oppression; stewardship and respect outside a singular lens of dominant culture, care for the earth, voice to the unheard. One noticeable omission was a neurodivergent perspective, which the authors may choose to explore in future works.

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AKJournals

Editors Bia Labate and Clancy Cavnar work alongside each other at the Chacruna Institute, an organization devoted to ‘reciprocity in the psychedelic community’ and ‘the protection of sacred plants and cultural traditions’. Each are prolific writers and scholars in their own right. Labate holds a Ph.D. in social anthropology and her interests include plant medicines, drug policy and social justice. She serves as a cultural specialist with the Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), a Visiting Scholar at Naropa University’s Center for Psychedelic Studies and Advisor for the Veteran Mental Health Leadership Coalition. Labate co-founded the Interdisciplinary Group for Psychoactive Studies (NEIP) and has authored, co-authored or edited seventeen books and numerous articles in the field. Cavnar holds a clinical Ph.D. in Psychology from John F. Kennedy University and operates a private practice in transformative therapy in San Francisco. She is a research associate for the Interdisciplinary Group for Psychoactive Studies (NEIP), and has co-authored and co-edited numerous books and articles in the therapeutic use of psychedelics, with a particular focus on the experiences of gay and lesbian people when they take ayahuasca.

To be presented with such a rich variety of perspectives is eye-opening. Perhaps the revelation strikes deeper because I personally recognize so many good intentions in the move to decriminalize and expand the use of psychedelics as a healing modality, and yet the gap between intention and impact weighs heavy when unconscious bias is left unchecked. With this collection of essays, the authors support the reader to widen their lens and identify pockets of deep ignorance, which, left unchecked, have a potential for great harm through unconsciously perpetuating a status quo.

There is certainly a sense of adding to the “permanent white water” of social, political, legal, and academic views on the subject – not only as an objective measure, but more importantly the feeling of accelerating change and escalating complexity in an environment (Vaill, 1996). In this situation it may seem easier to resolve to quietly avoid the conversation – to risk bypassing by assuming that good intentions are enough. Readers are challenged to consider whether what we seek is simply a calmness meant to sustain our own comfort.

In their contribution *Psychedelic Masculinities: Reflections on Power, Violence, and Privilege*, author Gabriel Amezcua asks us to go deeper than a surface-level softening of the masculine whilst in a psychedelic state more sensitive to harm than our waking consciousness may be. Amezcua gets right at the core of it: confrontation with power dynamics and that feeling uncomfortable about it is the road less traveled that we must traverse: the personal work of examining our unconscious or otherwise privilege and biases, a commitment to the work not only on our surface behaviors and thinking, but the opportunity to recalibrate underlying paradigms we all carry, to heal ourselves, and our communities.

Costello and Cassity’s *Why Oneness Is Not Incompatible with Identity Politics*, highlights the pervasiveness of implicit biases in the dominant culture. Identifying an almost

singular narrative of “oneness” with the universe as an ultimate, or, ‘the correct’ experience of psychedelic ingestion, the authors explore just how we arrived at this point: a legacy of cisgender heterosexual male literature, measurement tools anchored in equating mystical experience with this one-ness. And they offer an invitation, to walk together to explore the experience of oneness as it correlates with the privilege of a dominant culture. Is “oneness” used as shorthand for “sameness”, as compared to perhaps what James Hall described as “... moving toward intimacy with all humanity even as one achieves great harmony with the vast unconscious.” (Hall, 1987 in Clements, 2004, p. 38). There is a wondrous subtlety in so few pages that encourages the reader to delve into further reflection.

This “further” is key to engaging curiosity and creativity rather than overwhelm. *Psychedelic Justice* presents clearly an invitation for paradigm shift – not that all answers must be known before embarking on the revolution, but that there must be no compromise on the conscious choice of the underlying structures, the patterns from which the revolution is built – considered, and consciously chosen rather than blithely inherited from our surroundings in an effort to “fit in” and quest for legitimacy in a hostile world. What is required is an active, rigorous engagement with sources of wisdom both traditional and less so, and to “distinguish between feelings of profound engagement, that which I call rigorous, and stultifying ideologies of dead truth which have been used to obliterate the *other*.” (de Freitas, 2004, in Cole, 2004, p. 269).

To retain a moral high ground set by a legacy of good intentions in the West, it seems the psychedelic movement necessitates leadership vastly differentiated from that which surrounds us. Riane Eisler highlights an almost default position for humanity today in leadership that dominates, force ranks one part of humanity over another through violence (Eisler, 1987). Without conscious engagement, the risk is that psychedelics become “locked up” in a Western psychological model, whilst simultaneously failing to recognize thousands of years of indigenous wisdom in the guidance and respect for plant medicine. Such overt perpetuation of systemic oppression would be a terrible legacy for a movement grounded in ideals of liberation.

What might the revolution look like when organized from an alternative perspective – one where leadership is equated with partnership, where “... social relations are primarily based on the principle of linking rather than ranking” (Eisler, 1987, p. xvii) and we incorporate a variety of ways of knowing. Where “... diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority.” (Eisler, 1987, p. xvii). *Psychedelic Justice* elevates these voices to consciousness with an inherent suggestion of what this reality might look like, how good intentions might intentionally manifest.

Brene Brown is attributed with saying “unclear is unkind”, and clarity is a gift of the authors and editors for *Psychedelic Justice*, as they hold their compassion forefront and support readers to realize the tightrope we all walk – “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” (Lorde, 1984/1979). Is the psychedelic movement actively building a new world, or unconsciously perpetuating the



status quo? After reading this book, I believe many readers will be left answering that question in an unexpected way.

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