

ALEX GAGE

Something in the Water

The American acid endemic

This study is an analysis of the reaction against the use of the substance LSD-25 in the United States of America during the 1960s. It seeks to answer why and how the drug appeared and vanished from the cultural landscape so rapidly, drawing from a pool of historical writings as well as primary documents from both academic and popular sources. It begins with a brief history of the scientific origins of LSD during the 1950s and the drug's place in the fields of chemistry, psychology, and among respectable figures of the international intelligentsia. The rest of my paper analyzes the methods and motives of government and moral authorities against the acid-fuelled counterculture that was emerging. This was in the wake of the ban of all sales and production of the substance in the United States by 1965. In this paper, I propose that the reaction against LSD use followed the paradigm of moral panic theory, and explain the perceived threat apparent in the relationship between LSD culture and the contemporary, mainstream American culture regarding the role of science and medicine, religion, racial tension, an affluent and educated youth culture, and anti-communist paranoia. My research findings suggest that the cause of the establishment's strong reaction against LSD and the surrounding subculture was not that it opposed the fundamentals of mainstream American culture; rather, that it adhered perfectly to those core themes of American life and pushed them to the breaking point.

During the sixties in America, entering the alternate world of self-induced hallucination became the greatest escapist obsession since the advent of television. There were many choices of drug for those seeking the grooviest "trip." But the most iconographic drug favoured by the masses was the king of psychedelics, LSD. The rampant LSD use that characterized much of the 1960s American counterculture has been construed as many things by its mainstream cousin: an attack on the establishment, an epidemic of escapism, profane religious dissidence, even an effort of hostile Soviet subterfuge (Lee & Shlain, 1985, p. 276). Whatever the accusation, the ingestion of LSD was depicted as a seditious act undertaken by

The American Acid Endemic

those who wished to destroy the foundations of American society. The reality is that acid culture expounded and exaggerated the fundamental American ideals present in the 1960s to grotesque and absurd proportions. This fun-house mirror effect, which LSD provided, aggravated the insecurities of Cold War America. The mainstream feared that the drug could be the straw to break the camel's back in America's effort to balance dynamic internal changes with the image of national unity demanded under the shadow of the Cold War and the domestic strain of the Vietnam proxy war. The result was a moral panic and backlash against one of the counterculture's main weapons of subversion: LSD. There was, however, a critical problem with attempts at suppressing the drug: the American acid endemic was a direct product of the same societal fundamentals it was thought to threaten as it distorted the social fabric of middle-class America, its science, religion, and politics.

"Moral panic" is a sociological theory that describes the process by which something that is considered objectionable to the moral majority is reproached. It is first identified as a threat to the values or interests of the establishment. Second, this threat is attached to a visible or easily identifiable minority group. Next, there is a rapid build-up of sensational and disproportionate accounts of the dangers posed. This is concluded by what is seen to be a suitable response by higher authorities with aims to restore the peace to a disturbed public (Krinsky, 2013, pp. 3-4). Tracing the fleeting yet brilliant saga of acid culture, it is apparent that the social instability brought about by the mercurial shifts of 1960s American culture provided a hotbed for just such a phenomenon. It was by this reactionary formula that the potentialities of a legal life for the now infamous drug were cut down.

What is often overshadowed by the drama of the '60s are the clinical origins of the compound LSD-25 and its initial popularity in the scientific—particularly the psychiatric—world. It was not until the mid-'60s that LSD fell from scientific grace as it became clear that this substance was a double-edged sword (Edwards, 2004, p. 203). Its therapeutic contributions to the field of psychiatry in the 1950s had set it up to be one of the major triumphs of twentieth-century medicine.¹ Proponents of LSD therapy were excited by the drug's ability to open up the inner workings of a patient's psyche when combined with the established practice of psychoanalysis (Edwards, 2004, p. 203). By guiding patients through an acid trip, psychotherapists claimed incredible inroads in the treatment of alcoholism, autism, obsessive compulsive disorder, sexual aberrations, schizophrenia, and in assisting terminally ill patients to cope with their mortality (Lee & Shlain, 1985, p. 89). Hallucinations could be symbolized and repressed memories could be evoked more readily as patients were induced into to a state of "model psychosis" (Hofmann, 1980, p. 47). LSD manufactured by Sandoz Laboratories was provided freely to researchers for use in experimental treatments (Hofmann, 1980, p. 63). Calls for volunteers to participate in studies investigating the effects of LSD on healthy individuals

The American Acid Endemic

attracted members of the young artistic and intellectual crowds. It is here that many of the sixties' most prominent acid gurus and disciples, including Allen Ginsberg and Ken Kesey, were first introduced to its effects (Conners, 2010, p. 167). Ironically, the studies in which the latter participated were actually among the many branches of the CIA's own nefarious MK-ULTRA program.²

LSD's impressive reports, low required dosage, and absence of any detectable deleterious effects garnered what seemed to be an ever-increasing enthusiasm towards the drug (Conners, 2010, p. 166). It was, however, this unabated enthusiasm of pro-LSD psychologists that would prove the undoing of its scientific legitimacy. Sensationalist accounts of first-hand experiences with the psychoactive appeared not only in scientific journals but in popular magazines and newspapers (Hofmann, 1980, p. 58). Public opinion became such that it was perceived that anyone and everyone who desired to participate in clinical studies for a thrill or who sought psychological counsel would be offered a bottle of pills without reservations or pre-conditions. Many felt that psychologists were guilty of irresponsibly reducing their patients to mere guinea pigs for experimentation. No doubt in large part due to the eccentricities and instabilities of public personality Dr. Timothy Leary, the notion of "psychedelic therapy" had become a complete farce in the public eye. The medicinal use of LSD had become a joke. A point in case comes in Thomas Pynchon's brassy 1965 satire of American culture, *The Crying of Lot 49*, featuring the enthusiastic pro-LSD psychiatrist by the name of Dr. Hilarious—who happens to be guilty of committing war crimes as a Nazi scientist trying to induce insanity in unwilling captives and is himself completely insane.

On April 23, 1965, Sandoz Laboratories discontinued its production of LSD-25 (Hofmann, 1980, p. 62). Sandoz issued a statement concluding that while it still held that LSD had the capacity to yield worthwhile contributions to neurological research and psychiatry, three primary factors rendered the potential dangers of abuse beyond their ability to responsibly address:

(1) A worldwide spread of misconceptions of LSD has been caused by an increasing amount of publicity aimed at provoking an active interest in laypeople by means of sensational stories and statements; (2) In most countries no adequate legislation exists to control and regulate the production and distribution of substances like LSD; (3) The problem of availability of LSD ... has fundamentally changed with the advent of mass production Since the last patent on LSD expired in 1963 ... an increasing number of dealers ... are offering LSD from unknown sources. (Hofmann, 1980, pp. 63-64)

The illicit production and sale of LSD became a crime in the United States that same year and the FDA uniformly recalled the supplies of nearly all research

The American Acid Endemic

projects under new regulatory laws (Lee & Shlain, 1985, pp. 92-93). It would take another three years to make mere possession of LSD a crime (Lee & Shlain, 1985, p. 93). LSD itself was basically non-toxic; no conclusive evidence has proven it fundamentally harmful to humans. Curiously, that seems to have been inconsequential to the discourse, post-1963. The fate of LSD-25 in the United States may very well have been decided in that year, when the Sandoz patent expired and production fell into the hands of black-market manufacturers. The carefully constructed environments of the clinical experiments, however contentious, were now replaced by the highly combustible atmosphere of the American streets. In this setting, there was no appropriate application for a substance like LSD. So, along with its flagitious reputation, it seeped into the existing organism of American society with very much the same effect and potency that it had over the human organism.

Once released into the public sphere, what began as a controversial scientific debate quickly escalated into a full-blown moral panic by the mid-'60s. Just as one might react in fear to the distorted perception of his or her own reflection during an acid trip, so did America at large when exposed to its mirror image under the influence of LSD. Public concern surrounded LSD's perversion of America, particularly the youth population who, historically, is considered susceptible to corruption in instances of moral panic. Remembering what it had done to psychology, it seemed that anything acid touched would be helplessly corroded. Given this outlook, the fearful reaction when LSD found its way into the core institutions of the country's national identity comes as little surprise.

The United States has always been a deeply religious nation; its official and implicit laws, along with its systems of moral value, have developed from fundamental Christian values embedded in the social fabric since the first British settler communities established themselves on the east coast. When the nation's values have ostensibly become threatened, the most influential pushes for American moral reform have been spearheaded by Christian organizations or parties who have openly grounded their beliefs and mission within a religious framework.³ To declare something un-Christian has the immediate connotation of being threatening to Americans at large. This was perhaps one of the greatest strikes against LSD on moral grounds. Hallucinogenic drugs have the power to induce what many perceive as a religious experience (DeBold & Leaf, 1967, p. 63), and LSD, an incredibly potent hallucinogen, has the ability to produce an incredibly potent religious experience. The problem with this brand of spirituality, however, is that, "although the experience is profoundly a religious one, it isn't quite Christian enough" (Alpert, 1966, p. 60).

The notion that it was possible to achieve spiritual ascendance by taking a drug flew in the face of Christian beliefs. Particularly distressed was the doctrine of the Protestant work ethic and its covenant of works. By Protestant logic, if it was no

The American Acid Endemic

longer necessary to spend an entire lifetime obeying the rules of God,⁴ and instead all that was necessary was to pop a pill, then the entire religious framework supporting the country would be set to collapse. Melodramatic as it may seem, the sheer anarchy in which some groups chose to participate while under the influence of mind-altering drugs lent support to this argument.

Since the 1950s, intellectual figures such as Aldus Huxley had argued in support of psychedelics. He stated: "I am not so foolish as to equate what happens under the influence of [psychedelic drugs] with ... enlightenment, the beatific vision. All I am suggesting is that the mescaline experience is what Catholic theologians call, 'a gratuitous grace,' not necessary to salvation but potentially helpful" (Huxley, 1954, p. 73). His theory was that the intoxication of mind-altering drugs could lend anyone a greater understanding of his or her chosen spirituality. For Huxley, this included Christianity as much as it did the Peyote Cult of Mexico.⁵ Many of the seekers⁶ justified their actions with arguments similar to Huxley's: that, albeit far more potent, LSD was fundamentally the same as religious experiences achieved through established practices like fasting, Yogic breathing exercises, chanting, singing of hymns, or prayer (Huxley, 1954, pp. 143-144). Predictably, heavy intoxication of any kind, and for any purpose, directly conflicted with the values of temperance and social responsibility proclaimed by Christian moralists since the colonial era. Even the mere suggestion of fuelling Christianity with drugs constituted blatant sacrilege.

It was also possible that the exorbitant claims of religious experiences made by those taking LSD were little more than attempts to justify a drug habit. Timothy Leary, the original prophet of acid, made several attempts while acting as the head of his League for Spiritual Freedom to gain amnesty in his copious use of LSD because he claimed that it was the sacrament of his religion. He argued that so long as it was illegal to manufacture, possess, use, and distribute LSD, the United States of America was infringing his constitutional right under the first amendment to "freely practice" his religion by outlawing its sacrament (DeBold & Leaf, 1967, pp. 102-104). The case of *People v. Woody* ruling in favour of the Navajo Indians' practice of their peyote-based faith being protected under the constitution was cited frequently as a comparative (DeBold & Leaf, 1967, pp. 102-104); however, Leary's appeal was less successful. Legitimate or not, the perceived epidemic of LSD abuse in the United States outside of any discernible religious context made this an issue beyond Leary's personal, if controversial, beliefs. The courts worried that if LSD were made legal on religious grounds, joy-trippers would also take advantage and regulation would become completely impossible.

A last religious black mark against the acid eaters was the colourful splashes of Eastern philosophy and spirituality that adorned the movement. For example, Timothy Leary translated the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* into English and from 1963 onwards proceeded to refer to it as a sort of manual for guiding acid trips (Blum,

The American Acid Endemic

1964, p. 154). Disciples of Leary followed a belief system described by a psychologist observing Leary's ill-fated Utopian experiment in Zuhuatanejo, Mexico as, "a mixture of modern psychology, New England intellectual mysticism, and modified Mahayana Buddhism" (Blum, 1964, p. 164). Poet Allen Ginsberg, cultural icon of the '60s, spent several years living abroad in India and Tibet to study eastern spirituality, even meeting once with the Dalai Lama (Connors, 2010, p. 139). The fear existed that not only was the Christian faith being perverted by drug addicts, but that proselytizers of LSD were attempting to convert good Christians to a *foreign* and hedonistic religion.

Opponents of its use needed every means available to them in order to construct acid as a foreign identity. As previously stated, the LSD boom of the sixties blossomed into a full moral panic. Previously in the United States, drug scares had been successfully blamed on ethnic minorities.⁷ What was so disturbing this time around with LSD was that instead of some fringe ethnic group, the vice in question belonged to the very same group of young, educated, white middle-class Americans who were supposed to be sheltered from its outside influence (Lee & Shlain, 1985, p. 153).

The 1960s were a time when an unprecedented number of youths chose to pursue higher education (Henderson & Glass, 1994, p. 4). This, paired with "a heightened societal interest in the workings of the mind" (Henderson & Glass, 1994, p. 4), would provide perfect testing grounds for LSD. In the first half of the decade, the drug was still a hot scientific topic, a drug whose pushers were not black jazzers, immigrant labourers, or underground patrons, but professors, artists, and writers belonging to a diverse yet recognized intellectual crowd. This included the likes of Aldus Huxley, licensed psychiatrists and chemists, as well as another more shadowy school belonging to the ilk of Allen Ginsberg, Andy Warhol, William S. Burroughs, and Ken Kesey, especially before his Merry Prankster days. Of course, there is Timothy Leary as well: at one point he stood distinguished as a published and respected faculty member at Harvard, guest lecturer in colleges and universities, and generally recognized as having incredible potential within his field. However, one factor remained to compel comfortable, intelligent youths to experiment with the altered states of mind elicited by psilocybin in the case of Leary's early Harvard experiments and later LSD. The final push towards psychedelics was the understanding that, for most, the American Dream as it had been understood had already been realized. A sufficient salary, two parents, 2.5 children, and a car in every garage; this was the ideal of the 1950s, and by the end of the decade the majority of America had achieved it. Thus was born the suburban landscape, populated by children with enough education and free time to puzzle over the question of "What next?" The role of LSD in the '60s was in large part due to discontent amplified by curiosity and boredom with "the safety, predictability, and homogeneity of their suburban neighborhood" (Henderson & Glass, 1994, p.

The American Acid Endemic

31). Like all restless youth, this new generation sought out adventure and conflict against which it could test its mettle. Unlike previous generations, however, with the advent of the suburban American lifestyle, these old rites of passage no longer existed (Henderson & Glass, 1994, p. 31), with the exception of the Vietnam War. But for the majority of Americans who were not drafted for service, the realities of war were a long way from the drowsy blanket of their childhoods in the '50s.

To achieve the desired result, those who felt it their duty to defend the status quo from the onslaught of acid needed to identify the drug with a suitable minority, visible along lines other than simply race. The perfect candidates were the numerous radical political groups that were active during this period. A liberal interpretation allowed this list to include groups ranging from the Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers to The Merry Pranksters, Leary's League for Spiritual discovery, the Diggers, the Brotherhood of Eternal Love, the Hippie Movement, civil rights groups like Black Panthers, and even notorious gangs like the Hell's Angels⁸ as representatives of the threat posed by LSD, whether or not they actually ingested the substance regularly. The majority of these organizations could be easily identified by their bizarre or ostentatious appearance. As in the case of the Hippies' infamous disregard for hygiene, these were visuals already calculated as part of an effort to defy the conventions and expectations of society.⁹

Another common accusation was that people in these groups did not contribute to society, or were not "productive" members. This association served two purposes: first, it made it possible to stigmatize LSD use with distinct minority groups of questionable moral standing. This acted to mar the reality of who was really using. It ensured that when a citizen heard mention of LSD, it immediately triggered an association with threatening images of groups and individuals entirely unlike themselves opposed to thinking of their son who was studying psychology at Harvard. But second, as Lee and Shlain (1985) succinctly explain in their book, *Acid Dreams*,

By invoking the specter of hallucinogenic drugs, conservative politicians implicitly attacked the groups that opposed the war in Vietnam. [As] drugs became associated with cultural and political rebellion it was a lot easier to discredit the radical cause if the rest of society could be convinced that those uppity radicals were out of their minds—and the LSD craze was touted as sure proof of that. (p. 154)

This strategy applied not only to the contentious issue of the Vietnam War, but can be seen in examples surrounding the civil rights cause, religious dissidence as discussed earlier, and the various protests calling for social reform that were accused of promoting dangerous leftist ideology.¹⁰

The tendency to ascribe to LSD-using subcultures a communist or at least an anti-capitalist stance by both government authorities and members of the groups

The American Acid Endemic

themselves is certainly ironic. The circumstances explained earlier under which acid consumption became possible were sustained by a surge of consumer capitalism and economic stability (Harris, 2005, p. 13). Without this base wealth, there would be no time to pursue drug-fuelled flights into the stratosphere of higher consciousness. Young people would have been grounded by the reality of an unsupported life, occupied by working to meet their basic subsistence needs. Everyone has heard criticism of the capitalist system in the half-mocking slogan that “Money can’t buy happiness”; but those who chose to drop acid in the ’60s did not merely try to purchase happiness, they bought and sold reality for two bucks a hit in the ultimate exercise of the power of capitalism. The principle is no different from when the previous generation—their parents—paid for the ideal that was advertised to them when they bought their house, car, furniture, supplies for the new baby, etc.

The acid craze can be summarized, in part then, as a direct result of such a newly unburdened and well-educated youth population’s confrontation with an accordingly fresh set of social conditions and opportunities—opportunities that included access to consciousness-altering compounds such as LSD. In the context of the 1960s, LSD experimentation in and of itself was in no way a break from the lifestyle established in the prior decade, but rather a next step following the same process of logic. Economic security allowed for the existence of the incredible social tumult and change during this era as a young and idle intelligentsia explored the existing culture surrounding it and proceeded to push it to its limits. The force and speed of these processes threw the establishment into a state of alarm. LSD became the target of a moral panic as a catalyst and instigator of unrest under both moral and political jurisdiction. Established ideologies will always be slower in their evolution than the immediate socio-economic conditions of a post-industrial nation. What ultimately defeated LSD was that its proponents attempted too much, too fast in their zeal to reshape the face of America with the help of this new wonder drug. It is impossible not to wonder what might have been had LSD-25 entered the picture in another era. The fact that, while it has never completely disappeared, LSD has remained on the shadowy outskirts of the drug world suggests that William S. Burroughs was correct in his 1964 novel, *Nova Express*. He included a warning to the cosmonauts of interspace that if they wanted to find what they were looking for, to achieve something true and lasting, they must “learn to make it without any chemical corn” (p. 11).

The American Acid Endemic

REFERENCES

- Alpert, R. (1966). *LSD*. New York: The New American Library.
- Blum, R. (1964). *Utopiates: The use and users of LSD-25*. New York: Atherton Press.
- Burroughs, W. S. (1964). *Nova express*. New York: Grove Press.
- Connors, P. (2010). *White hand society: The psychedelic partnership of Timothy Leary & Allen Ginsberg*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- DeBold, R. C., & Leaf, R. C. (1967). *LSD, man, and society*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Edwards, G. (2004). *Matters of substance*. New York: Picador.
- Harris, J. (2005). Abstraction and empathy. Psychedelic distortions and the meanings of the 1960s. In C. Grunenberg & J. Harris (Eds.), *Summer of love: Psychedelic art, social crisis and counterculture in the 1960s* (pp. 9-18). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Henderson, L. A., & Glass, W. J. (1994). *LSD: Still with us after all these years*. Toronto: Lexington Books.
- Hofmann, A. (1980). *LSD: My problem child*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Huxley, A. (1954). *The doors of perception*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Krinsky, C. (Ed.). (2013). *The Ashgate Research Companion to Moral Panics*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Lee, M. A., & Shlain, B. (1985). *Acid dreams*. New York: Grove Press Inc.
- Lusane, C. (1991). *Pipe dream blues: Racism and the war on drugs*. Boston: South End Press.
- Martel, M. (2009). "They smell bad, have diseases, and are lazy": RCMP officers reporting on hippies in the late sixties. *The Canadian Historical Review*, 90(2), 215-245.

¹ In 1938, researcher Dr. Albert Hofmann synthesized the first sample of lysergic acid diethylamide [LSD] while working for Sandoz Laboratories in Switzerland. It was not until the spring of 1943, however, that Dr. Hofmann discovered, quite by accident, the potent psychoactive properties of his creation. Its greatest potential seemed to lie in the field of psychiatry. In 1949, LSD was introduced in the United States and supplied at no charge for purposes of research into its effects and application in psychiatry. Throughout the 1950s lysergic acid diethylamide was hailed nearly as a psychological panacea (Hofmann, 1980).

² MK-ULTRA was a top-secret CIA program designed to investigate the potential of psychedelic drugs as mind-influencing hypnotics and truth serums. The complete failure of this program with its unseen consequences, such as creating LSD fanatics like Kesey, was an embarrassment to the CIA. The program was dissolved when it became conclusive that test subjects were simply too high to be trained into hypnotic assassins or provide accurate intelligence to interrogators (Connors, 2010, p. 166). The history of the program is detailed by Lee and Shlain in *Acid Dreams*.

³ For example: groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, independent church groups, nationalists associations, etc.

The American Acid Endemic

⁴ These rules included devoting oneself to the task of being a productive member of society. This would be another complaint lodged against the acid eaters who chose to “drop out” of society, renouncing the old ethos of going out and getting a job to make money so as to be able to support the example which would become known as the “nuclear family” and the American dream itself.

⁵ The “Peyote cult” is a Native North American religion. Its members regularly ingest the highly hallucinogenic substance during ceremony as a central aspect of worship (Huxley, 1954, p. 71).

⁶ A “seeker” was one in search of spiritual enlightenment, whose chosen spiritual path generally involved rigorous use of LSD or similar drugs.

⁷ For further reading on the link between racism and drug-control policy in the United States, see Clarence Lusane (1991), *Pipe Dream Blues: Racism and the War on Drugs*.

⁸ Although not a group interested in the pursuit of psychedelics, Ken Kesey, with the help of Hunter S. Thompson, introduced a chapter of the Hell’s Angels to LSD in 1965 in La Honda under the suspicious eye of local police (Lee and Shlain, 1985, p. 125).

⁹ For an in-depth analysis of a typical reaction to the Hippies’ dress and hygiene by state institutions, see Marcel Martel (2009), “‘They smell bad, have diseases, and are lazy’: RCMP Officers Reporting on Hippies in the Late Sixties.” FBI agents in the U.S. reached markedly similar conclusions.

¹⁰ Such as the “Death of Money and the Birth of Free” happening, a late-’60s demonstration where a mock-funeral procession for the dollar travelled down Haight Street in San Francisco.