Turn On, Tune In, Rise Up

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Acid against austerity.

When cultural theorist, author, and blogger Mark Fisher passed away in 2017, he left behind an unfinished book manuscript. Acid Communism: On Post-Capitalist Desire was to continue the project of his 2009 book Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? In Capitalist Realism, Fisher wrote that decades of deregulation had all but fully destroyed our ability to imagine viable alternatives to capitalism. If we couldn't envision a better world, he declared, there could be little hope that such a world would manifest. Capitalist Realism was by no means defeatist, though. The book concludes with a call to action: Fisher draws attention to what he saw as the most urgently needed political resource. If the future we want lies at the limits of our imagination we must begin there — with the creative, unruly parts of our consciousness, that parts that capital wants to claim as its own. The current political nightmare, he suggests, will only be defeated by vibrant dreams.

In this spirit, Acid Communism was meant to strengthen the political imagination. A recently published anthology of Fisher's writings includes a draft for the introduction, which reads something like a manifesto. Fisher had taken a cue from his friend Jeremy Gilbert, a scholar who had long maintained that the sixties might serve as a blueprint for contemporary leftist revolution. Inspired by Gilbert, Fisher coined the phrase that would become the title for his next book: "acid communism" represents the idea that psychologically profound experiences — including the use of psychedelic drugs — should be used to galvanize anticapitalist movements. In the introduction, he observes that the optimism of the hippie-era left had faded during the heyday of Reagan and Thatcher. Neoliberal economics catalyzed widespread cynicism, Fisher claimed, and in so doing depleted the mental energy required for proactive organizing. We now owed it to ourselves to revive the hopeful politics that flourished in the sixties.

In the wake of Fisher's suicide, several activist initiatives took up the Acid Communist banner. The 2018 transmediale festival, an annual arts and culture event in Berlin, included a workshop called "Building Acid Communism." Workshop leaders gave the audience a series of prompts aimed at "unveiling and exploring the precise idea of freedom" that motivated left-wing activists. These questions inquired into how participants experienced boredom, whether fashion and style mattered to their political identity, and the last time they felt truly free from work, among other issues. Meanwhile, a spate of recent articles about Acid Communism reflect the multiple ways it might be interpreted. In one editorial, Jeremy Gilbert points out that the concept has taken on other names, including "freak left," "psychedelic socialism," and in the UK, "Acid Corbynism." Acid Corbynism is referenced in the title for Gilbert's new podcast, #ACFM (Acid Corbynism FM), which investigates "the links between Left-wing politics and culture, music and experiences of collective joy." Although they are eclectic, these endeavors agree that the psychedelic sixties might make a reappearance in the political future. The work of Acid Communism, it seems, is just beginning.

The timing is apropos. Currently, we are in the midst of what some have called a "psychedelic renaissance," referring to the revival of scientific interest in the psychiatric use of these drugs. Psychedelic psychiatry was a burgeoning field in the postwar period, but by the seventies the criminalization of all psychedelic drugs had brought investigations to an effective halt. After years of advocacy by researchers and psychedelic enthusiasts, clinical investigations of LSD, magic mushrooms, and related chemicals resumed in the nineties. 2014 saw the first peer-reviewed study on LSD published in over forty years, and the number of clinical trials is rapidly growing. Until recently, however, the psychedelic renaissance could not be considered mainstream. Its breakthrough moment came with the publication of Michael Pollan's 2018 book How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence. Reaching the top spot on the New York Times bestseller list, How to Change Your Mind was a watershed moment for the reputation of psychedelics. Pollan is a widely-respected journalist, and much of the current research is being conducted at well-known universities; Stanford, Johns Hopkins, and NYU all currently have psychedelic research labs. This is encouraging to those who have long known what researchers are now trying to prove: when used safely, psychedelics can vastly improve one's quality of life.

Although Acid Communism stands to benefit from the improved public image of psychedelics, these movements have yet to meaningfully overlap. I've been keeping close watch on both. My interest in the two subjects began around the same time, during my sophomore year in college. This was the fall of 2008. I was already skeptical of the US economy, but the financial crash confirmed my suspicion that capitalism was dangerous and unethical. That same fall marked my introduction to psychedelic drug experience. My initial encounter with LSD was overwhelmingly positive. It made believe that that the world was joyful, mysterious, and full of promise — an impression which contrasted sharply with the current political mood. In an attempt to reconcile my psychedelic-inspired hopeful outlook with extenuating social circumstances, I started participating in anti-capitalist and pro-peace activism. The fall of 2008 made it impossible for me to separate my political sensibilities from the hopefulness that psychedelia represents for me. But I've rarely seen psychedelics politicized this way in contemporary pop culture. I'd just assumed that after the sixties, psychedelic experiences could not be framed as political in mainstream discourse.

For the most part, then, I've pursued these subjects as separate intellectual endeavors. Both have continued to be central to my life. In 2013, I moved to New York City to pursue a Master's degree in Nonprofit Management. Although I hardly had time for anything other than school, I volunteered to help out at an after-party for Horizons NYC, which is an international forum on the science and culture of psychedelic drugs. Held every October, Horizons brings together researchers, artists and spiritual leaders to give talks on topics ranging from the globalization of the psychedelic brew ayahuasca to the use of magic mushrooms in treating cocaine addiction. My schedule of classes and work prevented me from attending any lectures. Volunteering offered me partial access to this complicated, interesting world.

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The night began with a dinner for benefactors of MAPS — the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies — a non-profit promoting psychedelic research based in Santa Cruz, CA. As we relayed kale salad and vegan cheesecake across the kitchen, my friend Nina pulled me aside. "This is weird," she whispered, nodding toward the dining room. I knew what she meant. The venue was a lavishly-appointed brownstone belonging to a moneyed Manhattan couple. It bore little resemblance to the psychedelic settings we knew and loved: earthy, DIY spaces which would no more readily welcome conspicuous displays of wealth like the one before us than then they would a visit from law enforcement. The guests didn't match the hippie image we associated with psychedelics either. Their conversation flowed from remarks about exotic vacation getaways to opinions on Brooklyn's finest private schools.

This shouldn't have been a surprise. It was a benefit dinner, after all. But I still found the atmosphere unsettling. At the time, the economic crisis of 2008 was beginning to hit me hard. Not long before the conference, I'd watched a close friend become homeless. The tiny heart attack that happened whenever I used my debit card to buy groceries — the I-hope-there's-enough-in-my-bank-account panic — had become a normal part of my reality, and I was resigning myself to the possibility that things might never get easier. A large part of me felt psychedelic activism to be extravagant in this climate. But I didn't want the therapeutic use of psychedelics, a cause I'd believed in for years, to become yet another victim of late capitalism.

I tried to keep that idealistic thought at the front of my mind as the night continued. If anything, I assured myself, I should be glad to meet so many psychedelic enthusiasts who appealed to more conservative perspectives. After all, I reasoned, a controversial movement needs allies in the mainstream. Still, I couldn't help but resent the guests for their seeming obliviousness to the current state of affairs. I wondered if they'd ever drawn a connection between their immunity to the war on drugs and their economic status, and if so, how much this bothered them. I wondered if they'd achieved some sort of enlightenment — perhaps thanks to psychedelics — that somehow made them both socially conscious and comfortable with their personal wealth. Even if participating in this space represented to me giving up some integrity, I wanted in on this insight. I was tired of feeling hopeless.

Although the luxe setting was unfamiliar, that would not be my last experience with psychedelic activism. My interest in hallucinogens followed me to my PhD in critical theory, where I explore the new psychedelic science in my dissertation. Throughout all these years, my social commitments have felt at odds with the pervasive cliché of hippie escapism. There is some truth to the myth of the disengaged drug-user: a friend of mine in the scene once said that, having attained a non-dualistic state of enlightenment, he "saw through" all political opinions. Other psychedelic explorers I've met intentionally ignore current events, claiming politics to be too depressing them. But, like a lot of common depictions of drug use, this is more fiction than fact. The consumption of LSD and magic mushrooms is no more likely to promote apathy than caffeine and alcohol. Moreover, in the age of Donald Trump and the rise of the new far-right, more and more people are realizing that their individual lives are ineluctably political. Political consciousness has extended to modern New Age subcultures, which now appear more thoroughly engaged with issues of justice than they did when I was an undergrad.

The Acid Communist movement has helped me view my politics as part of a historical lineage, not a misappropriation of serious Leftism. It's helped me embrace the idea that if the experience of tripping had a message for society at large — if it aspired beyond the self-indulgence embodied in Timothy Leary's "turn on, tune in, drop out" — it would threaten the very basis of capital. While the economic virtue of individualism rules over the modern psyche, any dedicated hippie will tell you that hallucinogens offer quite the opposite. These substances tend to break the flow of self-directed thought patterns, leading to a sense of unity with one's environment. This state of mind is inherently communal and collectivist, and because of that, it's easy to see how it could heighten sensitivity to political concerns. This is the connection that Fisher was to expound upon in his new book. We can now only speculate on what he might have said.

It would be wrong, however, to portray Fisher as the emblem of the movement. By Jeremy Gilbert's account, anti-proprietary virtues are key to the concept. As a diverse set of ideas united by a collectivist ethos, appointing a figurehead would make little sense. But if such a title were to be given, Gilbert, not Fisher, may be the more worthy candidate. In a 2017 article titled "Psychedelic Socialism: The Politics of Consciousness, the Legacy of the Counterculture and the Future of the Left," Gilbert offers some frank words on the difficulties he faced — and still faces — developing the notion in Fisher's absence: "'Acid Communism' was Mark's term for a political and analytical position that he'd derived more than a little from my work and interests," he writes. "But it would be totally against the spirit of those shared ideas and priorities to attribute ownership or authorship of any of these ideas to anybody."

So while Fisher appears to have owed Gilbert more credit than he gave, saying as much might be in bad faith. And, indeed, reducing Acid Communism to a particular thinker or even a cohort of thinkers would miss the point. While researching this article, I interviewed Gilbert, who offered some historical answers to the question of who might claim rightful ownership to Acid Communism. Although lighthearted in spirit, the sixties counterculture was profoundly critical of the bourgeois subject — the individual who sees herself as isolated and therefore acts out of self-interest rather than the common good. On principle, therefore Acid Communism cannot be represented by one person or group. This perspective bears a direct connection to political theories that emerged from Europe in the thirties and forties. Both Gilbert and Fisher link the postwar counterculture to the radical vision of the Frankfurt School, a circle of theorists associated with the Institute for Social Research at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. Its luminaries told of a structural relationship between individualism, capitalism and authoritarianism. With these warnings, it attempted to both retroactively account for fascism and prevent its future resurgence.

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Unlike the Frankfurt School, Acid Communism deliberately operates outside of academia, which makes it more widely accessible than movements developed mainly inside institutional frameworks. Some of Acid Communism's strategies include freely disseminating texts and speeches: Plan C, an England-based collective in the UK that produces festivals, includes on its website blog posts and videos of Mark

Fisher's Acid Communism lectures. But Jeremy Gilbert, a member of Plan C, acknowledges that the immediacy and immersiveness of psychedelic feelings demands non-intellectual modes of invocation. He views his work as a dance party organizer as part of his political pursuits. So while there's certainly no ban on digital organizing, real-world gatherings appear crucial to a new psychedelic Left.

Toward this end, Gilbert and Fisher both explored the viability of incorporating old-school "consciousness-raising" events in a psychedelic framework. First developed by socialist feminists in the 1970s, consciousness-raising encourages participants to share stories about struggles normally conceived as private and shameful. The idea is that when people tune in to others' narratives of hardship — which may include accounts of mental illness, social isolation and poverty — such problems are revealed as not an exception, but the norm. In his essay "No Romance Without Finance," Fisher writes that "as soon as two or more people gather together, they can start to collectivise the stress that capitalism ordinarily privatizes. Personal shame becomes dissolved as its structural causes are collectively identified." When community is built around shared struggle, feelings of alienation are modulated by feelings of solidarity.

Telling stories in this consciousness-raising spirit is key, but making and listening to music might be an equally powerful consciousness-raising technique. At concerts, Fisher writes, "a mass audience could not only experience its feelings being validated, it could locate the origins of those feelings in oppressive structures." The current popularity of free-spirited music festivals might be framed as a reaction to neoliberal malaise. While modern festivals aren't as explicitly political as, say, Occupy Wall Street, they do permit attendees to transcend the capitalist reality of dullness and detachment. It's not just that people directly encounter joy, but that this joy is amplified by the presence of so many others. And at festivals, psychedelic drug use abounds. "Psychedelic drugs gave birth to the modern-day music festival," points out journalist Kevin Franciotti. "There would have been no Woodstock without LSD." It matters just as much that the historic Woodstock Festival also has a political history. The anti-Vietnam War movement was at least as essential to Woodstock as drug use. Jeremy Gilbert and the Plan C collective maintain that politics still go hand in hand with festival culture.

The politicization of tripping and trippy art raised my suspicion, however. Political thinkers have long been skeptical of a connection between aesthetics and politics. The difficulties of rendering politics as art and vice versa were a major topic of Frankfurt School publications. During our interview, I asked Gilbert about German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction." Penned by Benjamin during the rise of the Nazi regime, it makes a theoretical argument that the artistic representation of political ideals accommodates fascism. Dictatorships, after all, rely heavily on aesthetics. One might imagine the sweeping grandiosity of Nazi propaganda, or the striking color palette used by the fascist rulers in the fictional government of V for Vendetta. It's admittedly hard to think that tie-dye and jam bands might be used for the same purpose as the military uniforms and Wagnerian orchestras of the Third Reich. But applying the vibrant, affect-heavy veil of psychedelia to Leftist organizing seems strangely manipulative, as if it's not enough for politics itselfs to appeal to the intellect. And besides, not everybody likes psychedelic art.

In response, Gilbert reminded me that while Benjamin warned against aestheticizing politics, he was by the same token interested in the social potential that inheres in art. This, he said, is a major goal of Acid Communism, which seeks not to authoritatively impose an aesthetic program, as in fascism, but to cultivate seeds of transformation contained in already-existing cultural forms. Mark Fisher's writings on Acid Communism make frequent references to another Frankfurt School philosopher, Herbert Marcuse. For Marcuse, Fisher wrote, "art was a positive alienation, a 'rational negation' of the existing order of things." Fisher positioned Marcuse against another Theodor Adorno, another Frankfurt School philosopher. While Adorno upheld creativity as a space of revolutionary otherness, Fisher said, he did not provide any tangible visions for the politics that art might inform. Rather, Adorno had readers "endlessly examine the wounds of a 'damaged life' under capital." Instead of "marking our distance" from utopia — Fisher's final verdict on Adorno — culture should strive to embody the ideals to which we might aspire.

This sentiment was echoed by Gilbert during our interview. Radical politics, he said, are always utopian, and utopian intentions are wasted without a manifest blueprint for change. Psychedelic art, with its message of love and transcendence, delivers. "It's not going to be for everybody," he clarified. But he indicated that its recognizable styles — whirling geometric patterns, fractals, and musical intricacy — offer an "aesthetics of complexity" which contrast with the dull reductiveness of capitalist realism. "Not many people allow themselves the full extent of their complexity," he said, quoting composer Arthur Russell. With its multidimensional intricacies, both the art and the drugs might throw the banality of contemporary popular media into high relief.

Of course, psychedelic experience can't be relied on to lead to communitarian politics. One weakness of Acid Communism is that it appears to rely on a presumptive natural link between psychedelic experience and Leftist perspectives. This may have been the case for me, but, it's not exactly scientific law. In a talk titled "Psychedelics, Fascism and the Politics of Profane Illumination," religious historian Alan Piper admits that "initiation by psychedelic experience does not inevitably lead to liberal values" — where "liberal" is counterposed with "fascist." Piper's talk included a brief history of psychedelia's dark side. Hallucinogenic drugs, he noted, have long been deployed as tools of subjugation. Hallucinogen use prevailed in the Weimar Republic, and was formative for fascist thinker Julius Evola. Then there are the Cold War era MK Ultra experiments, where US government officials administered LSD to unwitting subjects to determine its potential as a truth serum. Today, the pervasiveness of sexual assault by ayahuasca shamans is becoming well-known in subcultures using psychedelics. And the use of ayahuasca by non-indigenous people has been critiqued as cultural appropriation. Psychedelics, in view of all this, could hardly be said to lead to directly to political enlightenment.

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The case of Burning Man — the world-famous gathering long heralded as a locus of communitarianism — complicates things even further. In theory, Burning Man perfectly embodies an Acid Communist practice. No money is allowed to be exchanged within its borders; it instead promotes the free sharing of resources as part of a gift economy structure. Burning Man is organized around the idea that people want to help out more than compete with one another. But there has been a recent backlash against this image: a spate of popular reporting tells of excessive tech-sector wealth and the rampant consumerism required to prepare for a week in the barren desert. The stories usually go something like this: once safely distant from their offices, Bay Area Burners descend into well-financed hedonism. Spending millions on private jets to the remote Nevada location, they proceed to "camp" in utmost luxury. Technology scholar PJ Patella-Rey considered this in an article titled "Burning Man is The New Capitalism." While he emphasizes that there's no causal link between the two, Rey claims it's also not a coincidence that Burning Man began in 1989 — the year that the Berlin Wall fell. "Burning Man demonstrates how market-driven consumption fuels a new commons and how this commons, in turn, creates new markets," he writes.

Gilbert considers the transformation of commons into markets to be a perversion of psychedelic values. But perhaps it's to be expected. As he reported on his blog, "you can't expect projects like Burning Man to end up in any place other than where it now is, in the absence of a much wider political movement for them to connect to. Experimental spaces like Burning Man will end up being co-opted by capitalism if there isn't some wider political movement to sustain them, inspire them, and inform them about how to do things differently. You can't really blame Burning Man for the fact that that's happened to it." It would seem that if music and art events are committed to widespread social transformation, such intentions would have to be extremely clear from the outset.

The intimacy between Silicon Valley and psychedelics deserves further remark. The rise of the "cryptopsychedelic" movement joins Bitcoin boosters and hippies, and initiatives are being launched to help corporate executives expand their professional mindset with some hallucinogenic assistance. And this surpasses the tech sector. Across the US, the reform of drug policy is a popular cause among libertarians and certain factions of the alt-right. Of course, not all who vouch for laissez-faire economics

support the new psychedelic movement. But in the US, much overlap exists between these groups. When I pressed Jeremy Gilbert on this, he responded that contemporary hippies who embrace libertarianism fail to grasp the political history of their subculture. The New Agers of the mid-20th century, he claimed, were never in favor of capitalist principles. But this history may be more clear in Europe, where socialism has not withstood the bad reputation it has had in the States. If Acid Communism is to thrive in the USA, it would have to emphasize that psychedelia has been long-embraced by anti-capitalism. Its current vogue among libertarians is a historical anomaly.

On this note, it's especially relevant that the psychedelic resurgence is not strictly happening in well-financed research labs. Much like the new left, it is taking place in the streets. As the number of legal investigations grows, the rise psychedelic in psychedelic drug may appear to be the exclusive result of science. A recent Vice Magazine piece points that the last few years have seen a major swell in the illegal use of LSD, especially among young people. "US government statistics show 1.31 million 18- to 25-year-olds admitted taking LSD in 2017 compared with 317,000 in 2004 — almost a fourfold increase since the mid 2000s," it reports. While the fiat renaissance raises the socially-acceptable banner of medical studies, on the streets, it crosses into brazen political territory. Vice interviewed 25-year-old Abby, a student in the US who claims to use LSD to cope with "the ravages of modern capitalism," as she puts it. "Psychedelics take the edge off the costs and burden of existing in a materialist and capitalist society, and the fact that this is not how life is supposed to be," Abby said.

The construction of psychedelic spaces "where people can learn and grow" might be a natural pastime for youth increasingly skeptical of the status quo. Indeed, aiding the creativity and curiosity of young people — capacities preempted by neoliberal education policy — could be a goal of Acid Communism. When I asked Jeremy Gilbert about his hopes for the future, he indicated public school curricula as a site desperately in need of reconstruction. While it may be hard to translate Acid Communism into education policy reform, its program of consciousness-raising might take the form of alternative education practices, such as teach-ins and ecologically-focused curricula. And, indeed, there is indeed a burgeoning para-academic psychedelic pedagogy. Most psychedelic conferences welcome speakers without institutional affiliation, and a recent assembly titled "Cultural and Political Perspectives on Psychedelic Science" joined scholars across disciplines to weight in on the social implications of psychedelia.

Although formal meetings openly embrace Acid Communism, its truths might always be more evident at the after-parties. While I missed the lectures at Horizons 2013, I've since attended a number of other psychedelic conferences. More often than not, the formal lectures are less interesting than the conversations that ensue. While it's too much to expand on medicine, culture and politics in a single talk, the disciplinary orthodoxy that guides conference lectures doesn't apply to casual conversation. [a pattern emerged]. Many people see their psychedelic and political commitments as intertwined, refusing to reduce one to the other.

This brings me back to my story about Horizons. Following the benefactor dinner, there was an dance party. People were welcome even if they hadn't gone to the conference, and the ticket price was affordable. As my friend and I made our way through the crowd, something stuck out: people seemed elated. They were unselfconsciously giddy in a way I rarely encountered at a typical bar. Of course, for some, this was the result of a little chemical assistance. But I was sober the aura was infectious anyway. It helped me set aside my bitterness from earlier hours and enjoy my company. I ended up talking to a man who'd brought his children along. When I asked him if he was worried about the party's possible bad influences, he replied that this was the most wholesome thing they'd seen all week. What they encountered at school, he observed, was far less uplifting. There was no argument there. Despite the reason for the occasion, the feeling of inclusiveness made psychedelics seem incidental. People were what mattered, not chemical compounds.

"This is what it looks like," I thought. An ideal was realized if only temporarily. Of course, it may seem tenuous as the basis for a new politics. But Acid Communism could be a component of a dynamic, experimental Leftism that is as interested in creativity as it is in critique. It would just take a bit of determination, and a strong dose of imagination.

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