

Will Marijuana Save World Capitalism?

Hemp to the rescue

Peter Werbe

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a review of

The Emperor Wears No Clothes: The Authoritative Historical Record of the Cannabis Plant, Marijuana Prohibition, & How Hemp Can Still Save the World, Jack Herer, HEMP/Queen of Clubs Publishing, 200 pp., Van Nuys CA, 1992 edition, \$14.95

Hemp: Lifeline to the Future, Chris Conrad, Creative Xpressions Publishing, 312 pp., 1993, price not listed

I have always loved getting high, starting with rip-roaring drunken weekends in my teens and college years of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Like many young people of my generation, my gang and I were always looking for new ways to get stoned in an era when little else other than booze was available.

Besides drinking, we experimented with nitrous oxide cartridges for model cars and futile attempts at rumored highs produced from such combinations as Coca Cola and aspirin in our quest for new mind-benders. When the 'sixties hit, we smoked up, gobbled down, and snorted up whatever came around, imbuing much of our activity with a philosophical/spiritual/revolutionary quality which allowed us to look with great disdain upon those still imbibing alcohol.

We agreed with White Panther Party founder, Detroit poet (and one-time official FE political prisoner), John Sinclair's essay, "The Marijuana Revolution," which held that pot and LSD intoxication dissolved the rigid thought patterns capitalism forced on us through the enculturating institutions of the family and school. It seemed very possible that psychedelic tripping and stoned states could aid in the subversive deconstruction of loyalty to capital's "death culture," as we called it then.

Of course, capitalist society did not unravel, but the allegiance of a substantial number of young people to this society did, so looking back 25 or so years doesn't give me the sense of, "Oh, how young and silly we were." Rather, those experiences gave rise to an understanding that no single activity, and certainly no single substance, contains the unique power to create the conditions for revolution.

Rebels in that era did any number of things which those in authority found reprehensible besides drug use, some even as minor as growing long hair or wearing Levi's instead of slacks. Parents, priests, police, principals and politicians concentrated their ire on the outward symbols of a sub-culture which rejected the more important features of power than how one dressed (although the rejection of consumerism and the refusal to wear military-style haircuts is not to be minimized).

Besides conformist dress codes, rebellious youth also refused the dominance of militarism, political rule, sexual codes and unquestioning submission to authority. It was these attitudes which were the real cause of such hostility to "hippies."

However, when the movement of the 'sixties, based on white, middle-class youth, found it had reached the limits of its constituency, it began to disintegrate as the 'seventies commenced. It was then that capital easily integrated much of the youth culture into its fashion machine as it also recuperated music, art, and even the rhetoric of social change itself. (Prior to then, no advertiser would have thought to label its hair coloring product as "revolutionary"!) Drugs, too, became largely another consumer indulgence.

All intoxicants exhibit a strange presence in a society where use is disconnected from a ceremonial context, and mainly function as a palliative for jangled nerves, a social lubricant, or as a diversion from emotional angst (none of which is bad, by the way, in and of itself). The desire of the rulers to keep people drinking rather than using drugs has less to do with ingrained puritanical attitudes (although fear of the deep powers of drugs is certainly a background consideration), and more with how it coincides with larger economic interests.

Booze is one of those anomalies of capitalist society like assault weapons and cigarettes, which, while being a major commodity, also wreaks havoc. Booze, as is well known by all, creates an enormous number of costly social problems and is often a factor in events such as rebellions among the poor (or even unruly college students on winter vacation in Florida!) which are distinctly unwelcome by the rulers. Eventually, all of the social costs are just factored in as the price of doing business.

The negative power ascribed to drugs also has a distinctly political component. Many activists in both the black and white radical communities believe the government, specifically the Central Intelligence Agency, has used the importation of heroin, and later cocaine, to stupefy and stagnate the threat of

growing radical movements. This seems to me an entirely baseless theory, although the introduction of those drugs has had a debilitating effect on many activists.

The involvement of the CIA in heroin and cocaine trafficking is undeniable (see *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* by Alfred W. McCoy), but came as a result of U.S. government agency alliances with drug lords in southeast Asia in the '60s and Central America in the '80s, not as conscious policy to destroy a movement.

The Dark Side of Drugs

Drugs obviously have a dark side evident in the social wreckage resulting from misuse and abuse, and it is on this aspect that the government and its stooges base their propaganda. It should be noted that although almost all the crime and violence associated with drugs would quickly end if their prohibition were to be lifted, there still remains the millions of addictive personalities created by a social system which fosters such mass anxiety that many people need a whole medicine chest of legal and illegal drugs to dull the pain of daily life.

That dark side was no stranger to my gang and extended community as a number of friends and acquaintances fell victim to addictions, leaving behind a trail of misery and even death. It was increasingly easier to become disabused of the idea that drugs contained an inherent revolutionary quality as benign and beneficial substances such as weed and acid gave way to heroin, PCP, speed, cocaine and finally crack.

Even marijuana, the alleged eradicator of the capitalist work and consumer ethos began to appear less potent as it became a regular feature alongside booze in the Detroit factories as a way to sedate the stress produced from noisy, strenuous, mechanized work. A roommate of mine was once getting ready for the first shift at the Warren, Mich. Dodge Truck Assembly plant at 5:30 am by rolling his day's supply of joints. I told him it amazed me how he could be high on the job since I was sure I couldn't work stoned. He replied that he couldn't work if he wasn't!

The benefits and problems with drugs aside, the government (which we believe shouldn't even exist) certainly has no right to ban any kind of drugs. They're our bodies and our minds, and we'll be responsible for our health and our brains, if you don't mind. However, a personal liberties approach has had little effect on the model citizen zombie who believes all the government propaganda about drugs, and there are but a scant few politicians committed to reform of the policy.

The commonly held prejudices against drugs, fostered by the official institutions of schools, churches, government and media, represent the triumph of the puritanical, repressive side of American cultural traditions and form the bulwark against drug decriminalization. The social institutions that have a direct interest in the maintenance of drug prohibition are the liquor and tobacco industries, oil corporations (which would suffer direct competition from hemp products), and the growing anti-drug industry.

To "win" the stupidly labeled "War on Drugs" would eliminate hundreds of thousands of federal, state and local government jobs in enforcement and incarceration as well as thousands more in the private sector employed in testing, counseling, consulting, etc. As it stands, the equilibrium between "offenders" and the anti-drug apparatus is perfect to maintain that sector of the racket. As with most wars under capitalism, this one is good business.

More Than Getting Stoned

The Herer and Conrad books are a good read for those interested in the beneficial commercial, medicinal and environmental uses of marijuana. The history of the cultivation of hemp (agricultural grade marijuana) and its widespread use for a multitude of products down through the ages is necessary for a generation which associates its use only with getting stoned. Hemp was widely grown throughout the world for thousands of years and provided hundreds of products as diverse as paper and food: even non-oil based plastic and fuel can be derived from it. So important was it to the economy of some nations that, according to Herer's account, the War of 1812 was fought with the hemp trade as a background cause.

Throughout the 19th century, in the U.S., cannabis was thought to possess a number of medicinal benefits, and a variety of over-the-counter remedies containing it were sold to the public. Also, World Fairs and International Expositions held from the 1860s through the early 1900s often featured a popular concession where Turkish hashish could be smoked. Although its industrial use had declined considerably due to lagging technology in the field and the continued introduction of oil-based products, hemp still was grown on American farms as it had been by Washington and Jefferson (a specific acreage of hemp cultivation was required by law for farmers in the American colonies), up until the 1930s.

By the early part of this century, its use as an intoxicant was mainly limited to people in the jazz scene, American blacks and Hispanics, as Euro-Americans continued to drink alcohol as their drug of choice in until the 1960s. The racism contained in the campaign to criminalize marijuana was evident in the focus of the hysteria created by a compliant corporate press which gave sensationalized accounts of "reefer madness" at the behest of the newly-formed drug enforcement bureau headed by a personality as wacky as his counterpart at the FBI: one, Harry Anslinger.

The corporate press, particularly the vicious Hearst chain, churned out accounts of lurid sex scenes involving "crazed negroes" and Mexicans high on "marijuana" (the Sonora/Texas regional name for smokable hemp popularized by the Hearst papers) who were impervious to police bullets and clubs. So crazy was Anslinger that he hatched a plan in the '30s to make a huge nation-wide sweep of hundreds of "known" marijuana-using jazz musicians, including Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and his plan was nixed by higher-ups.

Both books give a highly conspiratorial (and believable) account of how hemp came to be illegal through the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937 which ended hemp cultivation as well as dope smoking. Not so coincidentally, this was the same year the Dupont corporation patented rayon and which was creating numerous other petrochemical products which soon supplanted those previously available from hemp. The campaign to make it illegal took on the aspects of the hysteria associated with similar efforts such as the Red Scare of the 1950s, but its real focus was corporate imperatives not the overt social concerns.

The Herer and Conrad volumes (Conrad, by the way, functioned as the editor of the earlier published Herer text, giving it a much needed organization) are part of a new wave of efforts to overturn the insanity of marijuana prohibition. They signal a switch in tactics from the civil libertarian demanding the right to get high to high-minded reformer trying to bring an environmentally sound and multi-purpose agricultural product into commercial use again.

Dope Smoking Revolutionaries

Dope smoking revolutionaries were “all outlaws in the eyes of America,” as the ‘60s Jefferson Airplane song went, and more than one person has emphasized that marijuana’s illegality is part of its appeal. Pot use carries with it a certain willingness to accept risk and ignore authority’s rules. Suddenly, dope smoking longhairs have begun reeling off a litany of the benefits hemp will provide and often end up sounding like a combination of Thomas Edison and the Chamber of Commerce. This new stance transforms hemp activists (as they like to call themselves) from outlaws into reformers and futurists.

Rather than advocating smoking down and tripping out for the pure joy of the experience, hemp activists are assuring us how everything from paint to cars to medicine can be extracted from this wonderful weed, and with no environmental damage. What is lost in all this euphoria is any radical criticism of the commodities produced, the nature of work which goes into producing them, and the whole hierarchical nature of society.

When I read a news release from a drug reform publication, the New Age Patriot, which assures us that legal hemp will “...create new jobs and new wealth,” and the “dignity” jobs produce, I know an anti-capital critique is not part of the author’s program. It would take another article to examine the economic and social consequences of an industry which, while it might bring increased prosperity to a few aspiring entrepreneurs or already established chemical companies, would undoubtedly, like all industrial enterprises in the modern era, be defined by low wages, deadening and dangerous working conditions, and its own specific environmental problems.

The glowing promises of futurists rarely pan out, and the creation of jobs, new product creation, efficiency, etc., are the concerns of capital, not radicals. As it is the U.S. Agriculture Dept. is currently experimenting with other plants which could serve as a biomass for the same products as hemp, thus cutting the ground out from under the hempsters.

Hopefully, none of the foregoing will be taken as an argument for continuing drug prohibition. I agree with the contentions of Jack Straw in the accompanying article and still cling to the seemingly outdated notion that drug-induced ecstatic states can be a component in destroying allegiance to this system and the world it creates.

Hence, it can be argued that decriminalization will aid that process in making drugs more widely available. Good, but let’s argue for it on that basis and not with the logic of a good capitalist.

War on drugs? I can’t even drive on drugs.

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