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Preface

Europsychedelia

by Nicolas Langlitz

De la Renaissance des Psychédéliques, edited by Michael Koslowski, Zoë Dubus, and Vincent Verroust, invites readers to consider a vexing question: is there a place for psychedelics in Western societies? Psilocybin-containing mushrooms and DMT-containing plants have had their places for hundreds—perhaps thousands—of years in many Central and South American societies. Elsewhere, psilocybe mushrooms have also been endemic and presumably caused the occasional mushroom poisoning, and yet in places like Europe or Asia they did not come to play prominent roles in healing practices, rites of passage, or cosmological imagination—at least not until recently. The cultural and religious enthusiasm that especially North Americans developed in response to psychedelic experiences in the 1950s and 1960s arose quite suddenly. It did not extend back to the first phase of psychedelic research, c. 1880–1930, when anthropologists, experimental psychologists, psychiatrists, and medicinal chemists first described their encounters with peyote and mescaline. Those researchers were astonished—often fascinated—by the visionary worlds they entered, but they reported no religious epiphanies, nor did they expect mescaline to fuel profound cultural and political change. They did not even regard it as a promising medicine. When, in the 1960s, the so-called psychedelic revolution hit the United States with full force, European enthusiasm remained—and it continues to remain—more muted. “The West” contains considerable internal difference within and, at the time of writing, it is not even clear that it will persist as a meaningful cultural and political category. Given that the literature on psychedelics has been centered on the United States and Canada, I welcome the way *De la Renaissance des Psychédéliques* invites a francophone readership into the discussion. European psychedelia has taken, and continues to take, distinct forms.

As an anthropologist of science, I have been following the revival of psychedelic research since 2005. At the time, very little human experimentation was being conducted in the United States, and Roland Griffiths’ now-seminal paper, “Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance” (2006), sometimes credited with ushering in the psychedelic renaissance, had not yet been published. American philanthropists were channeling money to Switzerland, where government support for a budding psychedelic science was understood as a “locational advantage” to be defended against U.S. pressure to remain aligned with the War on Drugs. Swiss regulators also resisted pressure from neighboring France and Germany, which eyed Switzerland’s liberal drug policies with suspicion. The Zurich-based

neuropsychopharmacologists I worked with frequently mocked the mystical leanings of American psychedelic culture. The culture they were building around psychedelics was less pious and more secular than what was on display across the Atlantic.

Twenty years later, the landscape has changed radically. The United States has again become a driving force. The psychedelic renaissance has moved from its preclinical into its clinical phase. The prospect of turning psychedelics into marketable medicines has attracted venture capital, and government support is no longer confined to Switzerland. Over the past three years, I have worked on a project funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research that examines the ethical, legal, and social aspects of psychedelic-assisted therapies—in part to prepare German society for the possibility of market approval. (The same ministry also funds a clinical trial of psilocybin for the treatment of depression.) Such support is still a far cry from recent developments in U.S. politics, where the health secretary framed psychedelics as part of a broader effort to reverse what they describe as an "aggressive suppression" of certain medical heterodoxies, and where proposals have been floated to accelerate the incorporation of LSD, psilocybin, and MDMA into mainstream medicine. While decisions of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration have traditionally had a signaling effect—often prompting regulators elsewhere to follow suit—the embrace of psychedelics alongside a wider portfolio of heterodoxies may give European authorities pause. This makes it all the more important to think for oneself—and that is exactly what the present book helps readers to do.

The psychedelic renaissance has been driven by medicalization. This strategy was not self-evident. Central and South American societies developed different uses—divination, sorcery, preparation for warfare, or coming to understand what it means to be a member of one's ethnic group. Even in shamanic healing ceremonies, the drugs were often not administered to the patient but taken by the shaman to connect with the spirit world so that the shaman—not the drug—could heal the patient. Much of 1960s psychedelic culture was not medical either. Nonmedical uses aimed at self-discovery, personal transformation, a remaking of social relationships, and intense religious—or simply weird—experiences. Yet health has become one of the most cherished values of late modern societies, and one of the few domains in which the introduction of new drugs has been institutionalized. For those seeking to bring psychedelics into mainstream science and society, establishing a clinical use has therefore offered the most viable pathway. Accordingly, many contributions to this volume examine recent medical applications of psychedelics. Others examine aesthetic, literary, philosophical, ethical, and cultural dimensions of the renaissance. Given that psychedelic experiences raise questions that no controlled trial can answer, the thematic breadth of the chapters is especially apt. After all, we do not yet know whether medicine will be the place where psychedelics ultimately gain a durable foothold: the pivotal clinical trials

are still pending. The present book offers a comprehensive but necessarily momentary perspective on an unfinished story. Hopefully, it will sharpen readers' sense of both reality and possibility as we decide if—and how—we want these drugs to mediate our relationships with ourselves, each other, and the world.