

1991
5 ecstasy
deaths in
7 months

Taking drugs in the 1960s and 1970s was supposed to be about opening doors of perception. But, says **Marcus Roberts**, this was always a delusion, and when the doors didn't open, recreational drug use became just another aspect of the cult of consumerism

The ticket that

BACK in July, Tony Blair gave an unexpectedly anti-sixties twist to a major speech launching the Government's five year plan to tackle crime. For him, the roots of many modern crimes and misdemeanours were being laid forty years ago amidst the Kaftans and flairs, and to the accompaniment of Sergeant Pepper, Their Satanic Majesties and The Madcap Laughs. In the 1960s, or so the Prime Minister opined, 'a society of different lifestyles spawned a group of young people who were brought up without parental discipline, without proper role models and without any sense of responsibility for others'. The Prime Minister's cavalier approach to cultural history and social analysis was widely – and rightly – derided. But a vague sense that the 1960s had indeed witnessed a tectonic shift in our cultural geology has united both the celebrants and detractors of that mythical decade.

It was Phillip Larkin who wrote that 'sexual intercourse began in 1963' – 'between the end of the "Chatterley" ban and the Beatles' first LP'. This, of course, is, in one sense, complete nonsense (the 1660s were pretty rampant too). On the other hand, we all know what Larkin means. And something similar could be said about illicit drugs. Certainly the 1960s seem to mark the beginnings of a change in attitudes and behaviour which has gathered momentum ever since. When *Druglink* was launched in 1974 there were a few thousand 'problem' drug users. Recent estimates suggest that the figure is now between a quarter and half a million. Over the same period, 'recreational' drug use has migrated from the sub-cultural hinterlands to the cultural mainstream. The British Crime Survey 2002-2003 found that around four million people in England and Wales had used drugs in the previous year. It appears – contra Bob Dylan's *Ballad of a Thin Man* – that Mr Jones now knows pretty well exactly what is going on.

Thus, in an interview with *Safer Society*, Peter Martin, Chief Executive of Addaction, has argued that 'there has been a massive social and cultural change in the last 20 to 30 years, with drug users more commonplace than ever before ... we have to direct our strategy to recognise that we are living in a drug culture'. In a *New Statesman* article published in 2001, Johann Hari argued that 'it is time we admitted that this country is filled with drug users. From the granny who sips cannabis tea for her arthritis to the management consultant snorting charlie in the toilets of Stringfellows, from the council estates to the grand

estates we are a nation of druggies'. Hari concluded that legal reform is only a matter of time because 'drug use is already widely accepted by young people as just another fun leisure activity'. Noel Gallagher famously described taking drugs as 'like having a cup of tea'. The normalisation of drug use is, I think, grossly exaggerated. Most grannies still opt for Earl Gray when they fancy a change from PG Tips. Few management consultants are acquainted with charlie (or Stringfellows). But drug use is undoubtedly more pervasive now than it was thirty years ago. The question is, for better or for worse, is this a testimony to the triumph of the 'progressive' values of the hippy generation of the 1960s and early 1970s?

I suspect that the champions of drug sub-culture of the 1960s and 1970s would actually be rather disappointed to find that drug use is regarded as 'just another fun leisure activity' like 'having a cup of tea'. In their different ways, the likes of John Lennon, Syd Barrett, Timothy Leary, Carlos Castaneda, Hunter S Thompson and William Burroughs had high hopes for the social and cultural impact of psycho-active drugs, which arguably enjoyed an Indian Summer with the ecstasy-fuelled illegal rave scene in the late 1980s. Leary, Lennon and their contemporaries were looking to chemical substances to prise open the doors of perception and provide short cuts to new forms of creative and religious experience. Thus understood, the drugs emphatically did not work.

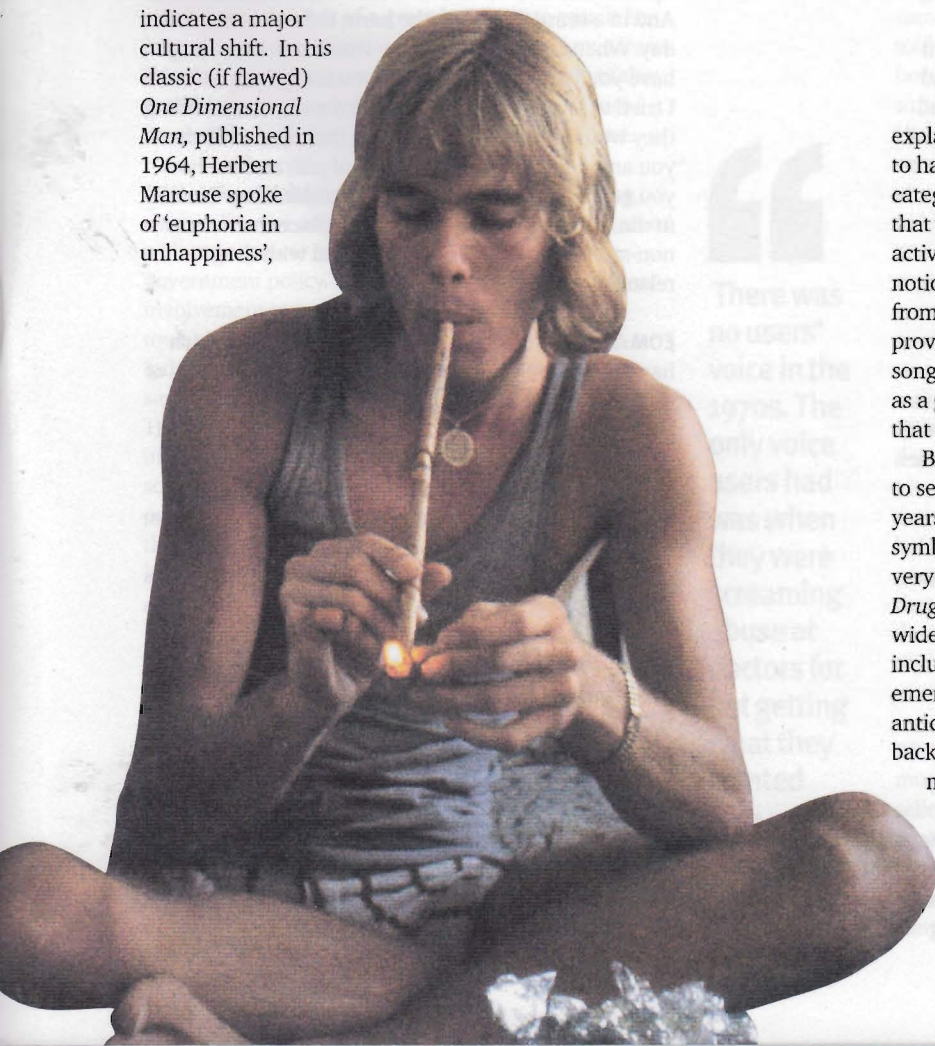
Here, for example, is William Burrough's reflective view of hallucinogens (including LSD) in an interview with *The Paris Review* from 1965, 'I think they're extremely dangerous, much more dangerous than heroin. They can produce anxiety states. I've seen people try to throw themselves out of windows, whereas the heroin addict is mainly interested in staring at his own toe'. And, on the supposed relationship between drugs and creativity, Burroughs had this to say: 'if drugs weren't forbidden in America they would be the perfect middle class vice. Addicts would do their work and come home to consume huge doses of images awaiting them in the mass media. Junkies love to look at television. Billie Holliday said she knew she was going off drugs when she didn't like to watch TV. Or they'll sit and read a newspaper and magazine, and by God, read all of it'. Hardly the doors of perception. No one believes that stuff anymore – and, indeed, a naive romanticism (in attitudes to drugs as much as anything else) makes a lot of 1960s literature pretty well unreadable today.

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exploded

So, the cultural meaning and significance of drugs in contemporary Britain is radically different to what it was in the 1960s and 1970s, reflecting the impact of Thatcherite individualism and Blairite New Labourism as much as the ethos of Woodstock or the Isle of Wight. Abandoning romantic notions of drugs as a road to self-realisation, the modern user, we are told, views psycho-active substances as just another 'fun leisure activity' in the shopping malls of contemporary consumerism. Thus, arguing that drug use has now become a routine part of everyday life, Professor Howard Parker explained that 'the sample [of his study] see their substance use as de-stressing, chilling out activity whereby intoxicated weekends and going out to 'get out of it' is the antidote to the working week'.

This attitude to drug use – as much as the alleged normalisation – indicates a major cultural shift. In his classic (if flawed) *One Dimensional Man*, published in 1964, Herbert Marcuse spoke of 'euphoria in unhappiness',



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explaining that 'most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume ... belong to the category of false needs'. In a world where the mere fact that young people regard something as a 'fun leisure activity' is offered as proof that it is a fun activity, notions like 'false needs' have evidently disappeared from the lexicon. For me, the singer Billie Piper provided a perfect expression of this viewpoint in the song 'Because we want to' – in which this was provided as a good enough reason for doing ... well, anything that you might want to do.

Be all this as it may, we should resist the temptation to see the increase in drug use over the past 30 or 40 years as the unfolding of a single process. The cultural symbolism of drugs and drug use today is, I suspect, very different from what it was 30 years ago when *Druglink* was being launched. This is linked to much wider and deeper processes of cultural change – including both the strains of the modern world and the emergence of the cult of consumerism as their antidote. These changes can, to some extent, be traced back to the real values and underlying motivations of much 1960s counter-culture. But only so long as it is recognised that leading members of the New Labour cabinet (including the Prime Minister) are – in their own ways – as authentically children of the sixties as the 50-year-olds who are still turning up to Glastonbury. ■