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The 'Civilising' of Psychedelics: Pharmaceuticalisation from Below as a Part-Process of American and European Informalisation[1]

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Abstract

In April 2026, US President Donald Trump signed an executive order fast-tracking access to psilocybin and ibogaine for the treatment of serious mental illness. This follows decades in which psychedelics had been vilified as a group of drugs entirely lacking in therapeutic potential, associated with counter-cultural groups such as hippies, and whose use was both criminalised and widely stigmatised. Our central questions are: *How have the substances, practices, understandings and relationships that comprise psychedelic use developed, and shifted, over time? And how might we best understand the overall structure and dynamics of such changes?* We argue that the recent psychedelic renaissance cannot be understood as the simple 'discovery' of a therapeutic potential that previously lay dormant in the substances themselves. It is better grasped as a part-process of longer-term informalisation processes, bound up with shifting balances of power between

[1] This paper is part of a wider £2.5 million Wellcome Trust-funded research project called *PATHS – Psychedelics as Therapeutics: Harm Reduction and Safety*, and traces the longer sociogenesis of psychedelics in the United States and Europe from the 1950s to the present.

established and outsider groups and with the changing behavioural and emotional standards – the social canons – through which psychedelic use has become refigured. Drawing on the figurational sociology of Norbert Elias and relational work on substance use and health, we trace the shift in psychedelics from counter-cultural sacrament to therapy and technology of the self. Through dialogue with a multimodal, multi-source evidential base, we develop the concept of 'pharmaceuticalisation from below' to characterise both the contemporary uptake of psychedelics and the broader figurational dynamics this expresses.

Keywords: psychedelics, civilising processes, informalisation, pharmaceuticalisation, figurational sociology

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Introduction: How did this come to be?

On 18 April 2026, in the Oval Office, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, signed an executive order entitled 'Accelerating Medical Treatments for Serious Mental Illness' (The White House, 2026). The order directed the Food and Drug Administration to fast-track its review of psychedelic drugs, named psilocybin and ibogaine among them, and committed $50 million to the effort. Appearing alongside the President were his Health and Human Services Secretary, the anti-vaccine campaigner Robert F. Kennedy Jr; the celebrity physician and Medicare administrator Mehmet Oz; a former Navy SEAL; and the podcast host Joe Rogan, who, it emerged, had texted the President about ibogaine. 'Can I have some, please?' the President joked to the assembled audience (del Barco, 2026).

The scene is worth reflecting upon, as its historical peculiarity is instructive. Psychoactive compounds and the plants that contain them that a previous Republican administration had, half a century earlier, placed in the most restrictive schedule of controlled substances, as drugs of abuse with no accepted medical use, were now being championed from the same office as potential instruments of national health policy. How did this come to be?

One possible explanation is the answer the order itself implies: scientific research has at last discovered what psychedelics can do. From this standpoint, the psychedelic renaissance is a story of evidence catching up with reality, of careful clinical trials establishing a therapeutic potential that misplaced prohibition had previously obscured. A scientific renaissance has indeed been under way for some two or more decades, particularly since a study published by Roland Griffiths and colleagues at Johns Hopkins

University in 2006, which reported that a single high dose of psilocybin, administered under supportive conditions, could generate profound and potentially transformative psychological effects – some 67% of those who received the drug rated the experience as among the five most meaningful of their entire lives, and around a third as the single most meaningful (Griffiths et al., 2006). That study, closely scrutinised by the FDA and Griffiths's own institution before it could proceed, is widely credited with reopening a field that had lain largely dormant since the early 1970s; further programmes at New York University and elsewhere followed (Carhart-Harris and Goodwin, 2017). By 2020, a series of early-phase clinical studies had reported promising results for psilocybin-assisted therapy in treatment-resistant depression (e.g. Carhart-Harris et al., 2016), obsessive-compulsive disorder (Moreno et al., 2006) and alcohol dependence (Bogenschutz et al., 2015). Others have explored the therapeutic efficacy of other substances, such as LSD for the treatment of anxiety (Gasser et al., 2014), and ayahuasca for depression (Osório et al., 2015), to name but a few.

Running partly behind this scientific revival, and gaining momentum only in the past decade or so, has been a cultural renaissance and rehabilitation: a turn in popular sentiment that gathered pace in the mid-2010s and crystallised with the widespread success of Michael Pollan's bestseller *How to Change Your Mind* (2018) and the various Netflix documentaries, podcasts, and interviews on mainstream TV and social media channels such as YouTube that followed from this. The cultural and scientific renaissances are connected but not identical, and the lag between them is, we propose, important.

Yet explaining the psychedelic renaissance solely in terms of scientific discovery is, by itself, inadequate in two interrelated ways. First, the therapeutic science is far older and more continuous than the renaissance narrative suggests. Psychedelics were used in Western psychiatry throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, with tens of thousands of patients treated using psychedelics during that period (Grinspoon and Bakalar, 1979). As such, the 'discoveries' of the 2000s were in large part rediscoveries, and were in fact part of an earlier revival of scientific interest in the therapeutic potential of psychedelics that included important studies undertaken in the 1990s in Germany (Hermle et al., 1992), Switzerland (Vollenweider et al., 1997), and, indeed, in the US itself (Strassman and Qualls, 1994). That the Griffiths et al. study of 2006 is widely credited as leading the psychedelic renaissance is significant: the study was undertaken at one of the leading, if not the leading, medical schools in the US, and it was undertaken using psilocybin, the psychoactive constituent in 'magic mushrooms' – a group of fungi that at that time was principally associated with outsider groups such as ageing hippies and youth subcultures. As such, the Griffiths et al. study directly disrupted these associations,

laying down a significant cultural and scientific marker from a highly 'established' institution.

Second, and more fundamentally, the substances themselves were known long before any clinical laboratory took interest in them. Certain of these plants and fungi have been present in, or proximate to, European societies for millennia, though, as we shall show, their psychoactive properties were not always recognised as such – the ergot fungus, from which LSD was synthesised, is a case in point. Others, the peyote cactus and the ayahuasca vine among them, were encountered by Europeans in the Americas from the fifteenth century onward. What is at issue, then, is not so much the discovery of particular substances and their properties, but a shift in the social canons[2] through which these substances, their uses, their effects, and their associations have come to be positioned and evaluated. It is through considering extra-scientific developments that we might better understand the lag between the scientific and cultural renaissance of psychedelics, and their more general shifting historical significance.

When Europeans first encountered the use of powerful intoxicants by indigenous American peoples, they very largely did not greet them as therapeutic marvels; rather, they widely dismissed them as the satanic practices of 'godless' peoples (see Hughes, 2003). It was principally only the least potent substances, such as tobacco, chocolate and coca, that were transposed into European life and cosmologies, and in each case the substance and its associated practices were transformed so that they might be used in a manner consonant with prevailing early modern behavioural and emotional codes (Hughes, 2003). Tobacco is perhaps the clearest case: it was refigured from its use as a hallucinogen in indigenous American shamanistic practice – a substance used to lose control (faint and fall into a death-like trance) and escape 'normality' (to bridge the physical and spiritual worlds) – into one that was used to maintain control (e.g. over mood, weight, self, etc.) and return one to 'normal' from different dysphoric states (Hughes, 2003). As such, tobacco became 'civilised', to fit with the prevailing normative codes of early colonial Europeans and their successive generations. Paradoxically, through that process of colonial extraction and 'civilisation' – one involving shifts in material tobacco through cultivation, curing, and processing; shifting modes of

[2] We have here adopted the term 'social canons', following Elias's usage in his later work. The term 'canons' refers to both behavioural and emotional standards—Elias (2022) notes, in hindsight, that these were always implied in his earlier work, but the use of the term 'canons' helps to highlight this. We use it to refer to the repertoire of interrelated normative codes, means of orientation and modes of relating within specific figurations.

consumption, such as snuffing and different technologies of smoking; shifting understandings (from a joyful panacea to a latter-day pandemic); and shifting experiences and effects (from therapeutic remedy, to pleasurable nervine, to private-regarding 'vice') – levels of nicotine dependence and tobacco-related illness spiralled, with indigenous peoples still to this day amongst those most severely affected (see Inskip and Hughes, 2026).

The example of tobacco helps to highlight the central arguments we advance in this paper: changes in cultural understandings of, and orientations to, drugs, in particular shifts in drug policy, and indeed 'drugs' themselves, have historically developed in tandem with changing social canons, and not solely, or even predominantly, with shifts in the available fund of scientific evidence relating to their health effects and therapeutic potential. While scientific evidence and social canons are by no means independent of one another, it is the latter that largely sets the evaluative frameworks through which the former acquires policy relevance and utility. To formulate this argument more provocatively, we propose that drug policies typically govern both scientific and extra-scientific concerns and express both biochemical risks (e.g. illness, dependence, etc.) and social dangers (e.g. being 'out of control'), sometimes conflating these. As such, drug policy is characteristically only 'evidence-based' to the extent that the implications of the available evidence are reconcilable with hegemonic social canons.[3]

To understand the recent renaissance of psychedelics, then, it is necessary to look beyond recent clinical trials to the wider social processes of which these form a part. Using the figurational sociology of Norbert Elias and those who have developed this approach, we trace these processes as part of a longer 'civilising' of psychedelics: their transformation from a counter-cultural sacrament, totem and means to 'turn on, tune in and drop out', into something closer to a technology of the self, used increasingly, in the

[3] The term 'hegemonic' is used here in preference to available alternatives. 'Moral majority' is doubly misleading: it implies numerical preponderance and carries the specific ideological connotations of the American religious right (applicable in some cases, but by no means all). Becker's (1963) 'moral entrepreneurs' captures the agentive dimension of normative code construction more precisely, but tends to individualise what is arguably better grasped as a balance of power between interdependent groups rather than the work of distinctive norm-enforcing individuals. 'Hegemonic' foregrounds precisely this: the differential in power chances between groups whose interests come to be expressed in, and partly reproduced through, drug policy, irrespective of whether such interests command numerical majorities. See the section on the informalising spurt of the 1960s and 1970s for a fuller discussion of the relationship between Becker's labelling account and the figurational frame developed here.

case of microdosing, to enhance performance and to restore one to 'normal' from various dysphoric states: to 'drop in' rather more than drop out. Yet sacrament, totem and means persist sometimes within, as well as alongside, these associations and uses – the same substance, and sometimes the same practice, carrying hedonic, therapeutic and spiritual registers simultaneously, as the accounts of microdosers (discussed later in this paper) themselves serve to illustrate. The most recent developments – including the conspicuous display of libertarian psychedelic advocacy in the Oval Office, which involved a cast of members of an established hegemonic elite, Trump, Kennedy and Oz among them, each of whom define themselves, somewhat ironically, as counter-establishment 'outsiders' – belong to a further, particularly striking, combination of normative codes that were once opposed and irreconcilable, and whose resolution can only be understood through a consideration of longer-term processes.

We propose that such developments can best be analysed as *pharmaceuticalisation from below*. The sociogenesis of psychedelics since the 1950s is a part of this process but by no means constitutes its entirety. Pharmaceuticalisation from below, we shall argue, involves in part a functional democratisation (Elias, 2012a) – the refiguration of differentials in power chances between certain groups arising from functional interdependence – of medical power and knowledge, engendering a partial redistribution of cultural and epistemic authority over health away from an established clinical monopoly. In its contemporary form, it expresses, too, a growing dissatisfaction with the pharmaceutical industry in the wake of the opioid scandal in the US; a deepening mental health crisis, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside a backlash against pill-based, SSRI-centred psychiatry; the ascendancy of citizen science and the role of social media as a vehicle through which lay pharmacological expertise is generated, circulated and authorised; and the formation of hybrid conceptions of health that wed wellness to neuroscience (see Stuart-Bennett *et al.*, 'Lay conceptions of health in psychedelic microdosing', in preparation). Through such processes, increasing numbers of people have become, in effect, *their own pharmacists*.

To advance this analysis, we first make the case for a figurational approach, and for treating substance use as a 'figuration'. We then set out our consideration of methodological concerns and the various sources of evidence we present in our discussion. Our substantive analysis traces four overlapping movements: the formalisation of psychedelics within mid-twentieth-century psychiatry; the informalising spurt of the 1960s and 1970s; the reformalisation of the War on Drugs and its long aftermath; and the contemporary renaissance. In the conclusion, we draw together these threads in order to return to the question with which we opened our discussion.

The case for a figurational approach: substance use as a figuration

Previous analyses have traced the recent renaissance of psychedelics, and more particularly, the ascendancy of microdosing, as a paradigmatic case of the neoliberalisation of the self. For example, Gearin and Devenot (2021) have argued that the neuroscientific and medical framings dominating the psychedelic renaissance reproduce what they term the 'responsibilising logics of neoliberalism', de-linking personal distress from its political and economic conditions and recasting socially produced suffering as an individual neurochemical pathology amenable to pharmacological remedy. Sánchez Petrement (2023) extends this line of argument historically, drawing on Mark Fisher's concept of 'capitalist realism' – the foreclosure of any alternative to the existing social order – to situate the psychedelic renaissance within this framework and arguing that Silicon Valley's enthusiasm for microdosing as a productivity and creativity enhancer represents the fullest expression of this political-economic logic. More broadly, a cluster of recent scholarship (Devenot, Conner and Doyle, 2022; Pace and Devenot, 2021; Tvorun-Dunn, 2022) has examined what one might call the *productivisation* of psychedelics: how their 'pluripotency' and cultural plasticity has allowed for the standardisation of their therapeutic application within frameworks oriented primarily towards profit, performance and the maximisation of productive traits.

These are important and compelling analyses, yet the neoliberalism framing, illuminating as it is, also tends to reduce psychedelic practices to an epiphenomenon expressing a more fundamental hegemonic logic – as though neoliberalism were in and of 'itself' an historical 'agent' that acts upon people and practices from without, shaping their orientations in ways that reproduce 'its' imperatives. Such a framing risks precisely the kind of reifying 'deep structure' imagery that relational and processual sociology invites us to question: the postulation of a hidden, noumenal, structural logic that 'underlies' and 'drives' surface phenomena (see Hughes et al., 2022 for a critique of this tendency). Accordingly, what we propose here is not so much a rejection of the neoliberalism thesis on the psychedelic renaissance but an attempt to resituate it within a longer and more multifaceted account – one that traces the manifold shifting balances of power, accelerating processes of individualisation and interrelated changing behavioural and emotional standards through which the forms of selfhood and self-governance associated with neoliberalism have come to predominate.

Psychedelic use, like tobacco use before it, is not adequately grasped as the encounter of isolated persons with a chemical substance. It is a figuration in its own right: a shifting

nexus of substances and their material properties, of technologies of cultivation, preparation and dosing, of understandings and discursive framings, and of the power balances and interdependencies between the groups for whom these substances come to gain meaning, utility and importance (Inskip and Hughes, 2026). Approached in this way, following Elias (see, e.g. Elias, 2012a), psychedelic use comprises shifting webs of relationships binding people, and the substances they use, in relations of interdependency, developing over time in directions that no single party fully plans or controls. The question such an approach generates is not 'why do people take psychedelics?', which invites a single, timeless answer, but the arguably more productive figurational reformulation: how has this come to be? How have the substances, practices, understandings and relationships that comprise psychedelic use developed, and shifted, over time (Hughes, 2003)? And how might we best understand the overall structure and dynamics of such changes? Our analysis in this paper stems from this sociological orientation.

This orientation builds out of a wider corpus of relational and processual work. Key in this respect is Goudsblom's (1986) now-classic essay on public health in the civilising process, in which he argued that the rise of public health and hygiene since the Middle Ages was driven less by an autonomous advance in knowledge of contagion than by changes in the civilising process itself: by rising standards of delicacy and sensitivity and by the densening interdependencies that engendered 'bottom-up' pressures making the health of the poor an increasing matter of concern to hegemonic groups. To read the history of health as the steady application of accumulating scientific knowledge, Goudsblom suggested, is to project the present onto the past. Pinell (1996) extended this argument to modern medicine, showing that the rise of hygiene and the management of infectious disease in the nineteenth century did not so much drive changes in behavioural standards as lend retrospective scientific legitimacy to standards that the civilising process had already put in place. More recently, van Krieken (2020) has applied similar arguments to a consideration of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Closer to our key substantive concern, Vrecko (2010) has analysed the pharmaceutical (self-)management of conduct as the deployment of 'civilising technologies', substances and interventions enlisted in the governance of deviance and the cultivation of self-control. Similarly, Reith (2018) has situated substance use, addiction and consumption within the longer development of modern selfhood, reading the compulsions and self-disciplines of consumer modernity as expressions of shifting practices of the self. Other work on the sociogenesis of smoking (e.g. Hughes, 2003, 2014; Hughes et al., 2025a; Inskip and Hughes, 2026) and on microdosing as a 'civilising' of psychedelics bound up

with shifting canons of selfhood and health (Hughes et al., 2025b) belongs to the same endeavour.

Related work from a range of perspectives also holds considerable utility and complementarity to our approach. The Foucauldian analysis of governmentality (e.g. Foucault, 1991) and the technologies of the self (e.g. Foucault, 1988) speaks directly to one of our central themes: how human conduct comes to be governed less through external prohibition (*Fremdzwang* in Elias's German terminology) alone but through practices by which people are enlisted, and enlist themselves, in the work of becoming 'good' subjects (or *Selbstzwang*), returning the 'abnormal' to 'normality' through expert-sanctioned techniques. The literature on the 'new public health' has shown how health has become a field of micro-political self-management in just this sense (Petersen and Lupton, 1996). Likewise, recent assemblage-oriented and new-materialist work in drug studies (e.g. Duff, 2011; Dennis and Farrugia, 2017), in treating drug 'effects' as emergent from configurations of bodies, substances, settings and meanings rather than as properties of the substance, converges with the figurational refusal to ascribe primacy to biochemical 'effects'. The affinities in this literature with the figurational emphasis on, inter alia, the social constraint towards self-restraint, the interdependence and 'entanglement' of biological, social, psychological and material planes of integration, are considerable. However, there are also important differences: in particular, Elias's attention to long-term processes and to the shifting power balances between interdependent groups that a governmentality account in particular tends to leave underspecified. This is precisely what we here are using a figurational frame to explore.

Again to return to some of the key themes identified from approaches focused on neoliberalism, we propose that the responsibilised, self-optimising subject of the wellness market, which indeed has been an important characteristic of recent developments in the renaissance of psychedelic use, is better understood as one expression of longer-term, largely unplanned processes than as the product of a hegemonic neoliberal logic. Central among these processes is what Cas Wouters (2007, 2020), building on Elias's earlier work, has called *informalisation*: the tendency of social and emotional standards in the West since roughly the late nineteenth century to become less status-ridden, more lenient and more reflexively self-regulated, bound up with shifts in power balances between social groups and with processes of functional democratisation (Elias, 2012a). What gets called neoliberalism can, from this vantage, be read as a late inflection of informalisation rather than its cause: a period in which the longer trend towards individualised self-governance intensified and was channelled through market and cultural logics, producing the responsibilised subject as one expression of a far longer civilising spiral.

For Wouters, informalisation is neither unilinear nor uniform: periods of informalisation alternate with, and overlap, periods of 'reformalisation', operating concurrently in different figurations, at different paces and in different places (Elias, 2013; Wouters, 2007). Crucially, informalisation does not mean a simple loosening of restraint. What Elias and Dunning call the 'controlled decontrolling of emotional controls' (2008: 27), and which Wouters (2007) subsequently develops, involves a relaxation of external prescription predicated upon, and demanding, a more nuanced, differentiated and finely tuned patterning of self-restraint: conduct once governed by rigid external codes comes to be regulated through a more reflexive and exacting management of the self.

The move towards the increasing use of psychedelics as technologies of the self – from drugs to *drop out* to drugs used also to *drop in* – runs broadly parallel to the overall structure of this transition, though it should be read as a spiral tendency within a more complex figurational development (such as concurrent civilising and decivilising processes and formalising, informalising and reformalising processes) rather than a linear replacement of one normative code by another. The sacramental, the hedonic and the therapeutic persist in shifting combinations, and the counter-cultural figuration has not so much disappeared as been transformed and, in certain respects, absorbed into the mainstream it once opposed (see, for example, Frank, 1997).

Psychedelics were being used in the highly formalised setting of 1950s psychiatry at the very moment that informalising pressures were building in nascent youth cultures elsewhere. As we shall show, the US-led War on Drugs marked the coalescence of a formalising counter-spurt; and the current renaissance, with its microdosing protocols and structured retreats, similarly marks a reformalisation of what had become, and to a degree remains, informalised in counter-cultural movements, now conducted variously through the cultural prisms of wellness, enhancement and self-optimisation, on the one hand, and breakthrough psychiatric therapies, on the more institutionalised other. In the sections that follow, we trace this spiral of informalisation and reformalisation, and the duality of normative codes – the ostensibly contradictory established-outsider orientations towards psychedelics – that arise within it.

Methods and evidence: a figurational, multi-source approach

The evidence we draw upon in this paper is intentionally varied. It includes historical records and secondary histories; archival newspaper research charting the changing portrayal of psychedelics and their users in the British press; documentary and policy materials; and interview data with contemporary microdosers. This variety follows from a figurational understanding of what evidence is and how it can be used (see, for a fuller discussion, Hughes, Goodwin and Hughes, 2016).

Elias once advanced 'figurational' as a better term than 'qualitative' for non-quantitative social research, on the grounds that the qualitative–quantitative distinction fixes attention on the techniques of data collection rather than on the social realities under study (Hughes, Goodwin and Hughes, 2016). The shift we adopt, accordingly, is from method-as-technique to modes of *engagement*: ways of orienting oneself to materials that follow from a particular means of orientation towards the subjects investigated.

Approached figurationally, a newspaper headline, a medical pamphlet, a parliamentary debate, an executive order or an interview transcript are not simply containers of content whose value depends on how faithfully they report an external fact. Rather, they are 'relational clues': at once referents of, and integral parts of, the wider figurations in which they are produced. No matter how distorted, sensationalised and fantasy-laden, a 1960s tabloid story about LSD-crazed youth, for example, can be used to tell of the shifting balances of power and the status anxieties of hegemonic groups; read in series, across decades, such materials disclose a 'diachronic gestalt' (Goodwin and Hughes, 2011), a pattern of change that no single document reveals. Form and content thus become simultaneously the object and the subject of analysis, and the recurrent concern about whether a source is 'authentic' or 'reliable' gives way to a different question: how was this document produced, with what others is it interconnected, and what nexus of relationships is expressed through it (Hughes, Goodwin and Hughes, 2016)? The three newspaper series we have assembled, charting first the stigmatisation and then the rehabilitation of psychedelics in the British press, are presented in this spirit, and for reasons of space are placed in the appendices; we draw on them selectively in the analysis as it unfolds.

The interview material derives from a transnational, interview-based study of microdosing conducted by members of the research team, the fuller methodological account of which is given in a companion paper (see Hughes et al., 2025b). In brief, twenty-three in-depth interviews were conducted in 2023 with people who described themselves as active, past or prospective microdosers, recruited through online

microdosing communities and interviewed remotely, with ethical approval from the University of Leicester and a multi-step consent process attentive to the legal sensitivities involved. We draw on these accounts here not as a representative survey of use but as one source among several, read, like the documentary materials, for what they can be used to disclose of the changing canons and practices through which the use of psychedelics has come to develop as it has. Across all these materials, analysis proceeded as an iterative 'dialogue' between theoretical orientations, the patterns we elucidated and the interpretations we generated, rather than as the 'extraction' of themes that 'emerged' of their own accord.

The formalisation of psychedelics in Western medicine, 1950s–early 1960s

The sociogenesis of psychedelics in the Global North developed in earnest in the first half of the twentieth century, initially focused on three 'classic psychedelic' compounds: mescaline, LSD and psilocybin, with much of the interest centring on their potential therapeutic utility. An early conviction that such compounds might model, illuminate and perhaps treat mental disorders drew them into psychiatric circles. After Albert Hofmann identified the psychoactivity of LSD in 1943, attention shifted, by the 1950s, to its potential as a candidate for the treatment of depression and alcoholism. This was pursued through two broad approaches: the European 'psycholytic' use of low doses to support the recall of unconscious material, and the American 'psychedelic' use of high doses to induce mystical experiences in the treatment of addiction (Nichols and Walter, 2021). It is worth noting at this juncture that both 'psycholytic' – meaning, literally, soul-loosening – and 'psychedelic' – meaning, mind-manifesting – convey different routes to a similar end: to use substances to facilitate a 'controlled decontrolling' of emotional controls, here to access the 'depths' of the psyche, surfacing difficult emotions, memories and patterns of cognition so as to render them amenable to therapeutic practice.

In this way, the early use of psychedelics can be seen to belong to a broader civilising of the treatment of mental illness, a process Foucault charted from a different theoretical vantage in his account of the historical production of madness and its management (Foucault, 2006 [1961]). Read figurationally, and recognising that the trend was far from unilinear, psychiatric treatment had over the long term tended to become less overtly violent, to involve wider circles of emotional identification with patients, and to rest on higher ratios of reality-congruence to fantasy: psychiatric medications displacing the cruder somatic interventions, less isolation of patients, and, by the 1960s, the patient-centred 'therapeutic communities' of the anti-psychiatry movement, which sought to flatten the power differentials between clinicians and patients (Laing, 1960).

Once again, 'civilising' should be read here in its technical sense, and not the more normative connotations of meaning a tempering into benevolence. As Goudsblom's analysis of public health serves to illustrate, treatment was being refigured rather than simply made 'kinder': the hysteric, the alcoholic, the madman were to be corrected and pacified, returned to a civilised 'normality', and as such 'cured' or 'liberated'. The widening spans of identification this involved went hand-in-hand with an expansion in psychiatric control and jurisdiction.

However, these developments emerged hand-in-hand with the antithesis of such therapeutic uses in the service of monopolised violence. Notable examples include the administration of LSD by the US Army and the CIA, sometimes to entirely unwitting subjects, in the search for a Cold War weapon (Dyck, 2008). The same molecule was caught up at once in a civilising movement, towards greater mutual identification and more reality-congruent psychiatric practice, and in a decivilising one, towards covert control and the instrumental use upon persons with whom identification had to be compartmentalised and sequestered (De Swaan, 2015). These were not successive phases but concurrent pressures within a single figuration, expressive of the dialectical character of the processes involved (van Krieken, 2024).

The 1950s also saw the Western 'discovery' of psilocybin. In 1955, the banker Gordon Wasson, accompanied by the photographer Allan Richardson, participated in a *velada* led by the Mazatec healer María Sabina in Mexico – an episode Wasson publicised in *Life* magazine in 1957 (Wasson, 1957). The character of this 'discovery' is worthy of some consideration. What was 'discovered' was a practice that had been sustained within Mazatec communities for generations. However, the encounter set in train the cultural expropriation of this practice and its publicisation and incorporation into Western scientific and popular circuits. The encounter had dire consequences, leading to waves of outside visitors to the Mazatec community and the eventual marginalisation of María Sabina by those from whom the practice was taken. The episode sits at the juncture of two processes: in one aspect it is continuous with a long history of colonial expropriation (see Fotiou, 2016; Hauskeller et al., 2023); in another it marks the incorporation of an indigenous practice into the controlled circuits of Western psychiatry and biochemistry.

This expropriation had a symbolic dimension that would prove enduring. Part of what gave these substances their cultural potency, then and since, was precisely that they came from 'over there', variously from the global South, from indigenous cultures, from the deep time of pre-modern Europe, and so stood opposed to contemporary biomedicine as the basis for alternative, counter-mainstream therapies in informalised settings. Conversely, in formalised settings of Western clinical medicine the relational,

communal and spiritual framing within which they had been used was progressively divested, and their usage refigured epistemically and culturally as a pharmacological action upon an individual psyche. As such, this entailed a *homo clausus* recoding in which a practice once held within a web of relationships became reapproached and reconceived as the biochemical 'effects' of a 'drug' 'on the brain'. Alongside this ran an equally colonial informalised counter-movement: the romantic valorisation and exoticisation of indigenous cultures as keepers of an authentic wisdom the modern West had lost. Both moves persist, transformed and amplified, in the latter-day renaissance of psychedelics.[4]

In sum, this early period in the development of psychedelics involved the expropriation and 'discovery' of these substances by Western elites and their confinement, by and large, to the formalised and controlled enclaves of psychiatric research, treatment and state agencies. This followed, and helped to occlude, far longer histories of indigenous use, of psilocybin mushrooms among the Aztecs, of peyote across what is now the American Southwest and Mexico, of ayahuasca in the Amazon (Nichols, 2016). These were not merely antecedent to the Western sociogenesis traced here, but were actively suppressed within it; the criminalisation of peyote, and the long and contested process toward its protection, is but one strand of the same drive to control psychoactive substances that we examine below as part of the War on Drugs. As we shall show, in key cases, the targeting of substances has repeatedly been, at the same time, the targeting of the outsider groups associated with them through disassembling their spiritual and biochemical infrastructures (Pollan, 2018).

[4] This refiguration of concerns for what was once construed as 'the noble savage' is instructive. The romantic exoticisation of the 1960s—the construction of indigenous psychedelic practice as keeper of an authentic wisdom the modern West had lost—has been supplemented and, in certain quarters, displaced by a more critically inflected engagement with indigenous knowledges and epistemologies of the Global South. Yet, as Táíwò (2022) argues in his critique of what he terms 'decolonisation2', this turn carries its own constructive paradox: in recuperating indigenous epistemic authority, it risks constituting 'indigenous knowledge' as an object frozen at the moment of colonial contact, implicitly denying the agentive role of non-Western thinkers and communities in the dialogic development of knowledge traditions. The false binary of 'Western/modern' versus 'indigenous/traditional' reproduces, in inverted form, a homo clausus treatment of cultures as sealed wholes—a move that, as Táíwò argues, leads directly to nativism and atavism rather than genuine decolonisation.

Psychedelics and the informalising spurt of the 1960s and 1970s

During the 1960s, the use of psychedelics, LSD principal among them, escaped the controlled setting of psychiatry and became integral to an emergent counter-culture. That movement was heterogeneous in ideology and aim, but its constituent groups typically shared an outsider position entailing relatively fewer power chances in relation to established elites.

Associations between outsider groups and substance use developed long before the 1960s. Howard Becker's classic studies remain a key analytical point of reference. Becker showed that cannabis users were constituted as deviant less by pharmacology than by the labelling work of 'moral entrepreneurs' (Becker, 1953, 1963), and that drug-induced experience is itself socially shaped and interpreted rather than simply undergone (Becker, 1967) – both insights complement a figurational treatment of a substance's effects as figurationally emergent (see Hughes, 2003). The concept of 'outsiders' that Elias and Scotson brought to their community study in the UK was likely informed by this same intellectual *zeitgeist*; indeed, there are striking corollaries between Becker's labelling account and their treatment of blame and praise gossip (Hughes and Goodwin, 2016). The figurational model nonetheless marks a significant extension: where Becker tends to treat established and outsider groups as substantive social categories, Elias and Scotson insist they are aspects of a single set of relational dynamics – positions within a figuration, each constituted by the other (Elias and Scotson, 2008; Hughes and Goodwin, 2016). Moreover, where Becker's interactionism, though historically situated, operates largely in the ethnographic present, the figurational frame supplies the longer-term processual dimension whereby labelling struggles are expressive of shifting power balances, and their stigmatising force intensifies precisely as the outsider group's power chances grow. The counter-cultural movements of the 1960s are a defining case in point.

The decade was one in which the informalised use of psychedelics in counter-cultural movements came into direct engagement with the formalised psychiatric use of the laboratory. Key academic figures such as Harvard's Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (later Ram Dass), alongside literary icons such as Ken Kesey, popularised psychedelics with an evangelical fervour, convinced from their own experience that the substances could be used to instigate change in the world for the better. After leaving Harvard, the pair became more centrally involved in the counter-cultural movements, notably at the 1967 'Human Be-In' in San Francisco where Leary coined the slogan that would define the era, 'turn on, tune in, drop out'.

Leary and Alpert were, at one level, members of an established group, part of the US academic elite at one of its most esteemed institutions. What made them emblematic was not that outsiders had seized power, but that the interests, orientations and practices of outsider groups, including the culturally and epistemically refigured indigenous and non-Western practices from which psychedelic use was drawn, were increasingly coming to inform established practice. This is an early phase of what we have conceptualised as *pharmaceuticalisation from below*. It belongs to a part-process of functional democratisation. As we have discussed earlier in this paper, such processes do not entail a progressive extension of elite benevolence: established groups did not come to take ever greater account of outsider groups through an enlightened goodwill. Rather, they were increasingly *compelled* to do so because of a shift in the structure of interdependencies. As Elias notes, such accommodations are typically hard-won, they proceed through a series of integration conflicts, and they are predicated on outsider groups gaining greater power chances as their functional value rises through denser interdependence and tighter social integration (Elias, 2012a).

Leary's own conceptual legacy includes a formulation that chimes directly with a figurational conceptualisation of substance use: the notion of 'set and setting' – the recognition that psychedelic experience is shaped not simply by the properties of a particular molecule but by the mindset and the social, psychological and physical conditions under which it is taken. Early clinical research had, indeed, failed to grasp this crucial facet and suffered for it; the renaissance science would build from it (Griffiths et al., 2006).

'The' counter-culture from which ideas such as this emerged was never one thing; its internal variety is of some significance. The counter-cultural movement comprised a loose confederation of dissenting groups that were variously interrelated with the era's other movements (civil rights, women's and gay liberation, the New Left, environmentalism) and held together less by a coherent programme than through a shared opposition to the 'mainstream' (Bach, 2020). Within it, psychedelic drugs carried strikingly different meanings from those of established society. For the most committed, 'dope' – a term that included psychedelics and other drugs, including cannabis – was emblematic of a revolution in consciousness and a potential social panacea. As Bach (2020: 56–57) writes, 'cultural insurgents championed "dope revolution" as a panacea for the world's problems, contending that marijuana — and especially acid — could precipitate fundamental social change'; *turning others on* was in itself a political act, and acid was credited with the power to dissolve 'the national, political, and racial loyalties that prevented humanity from living in harmony'.

For many others, the substances were a matter of more pleasure than politics (though, of course, the two were interrelated): '[c]ounterculturalists approached dope with disparate intentions and philosophies. For many, the pleasure principle and hedonism were paramount, while others elevated acid to the level of sacrament that could produce religious experience' (Bach, 2020: 59). Across the spectrum, acid functioned at once as sacrament and as recreation, and the line between the two was porous, and indeed has remained so.

This variety in the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s can be understood, figurationally, as a further development and extension of aspects of civilising processes that had already begun to emerge some decades before. Writing in the 1930s, Elias noted that '[t]he reduction in the contrasts within society as within individuals, this peculiar commingling of patterns of conduct deriving from initially very different social levels, is highly characteristic of the direction in which Western society has developed. It is one of the most important peculiarities of the "process of civilisation"' (Elias, 2012b: 423). The counter-cultural movement was exactly such a commingling. Accordingly, the psychedelic practices of the period spanned a widening range: abstention and opposition; controlled clinical and academic use; use for spiritual awakening and self-discovery; use for political 'enlightenment'; and explicitly hedonistic use, with every blend in between. This proliferation of uses paralleled the proliferation of groups whose power chances were rising and converging, and whose normative codes were mixing. The same molecule could be a tool for transcendence, a therapeutic agent, a sacrament and a party drug at once, according to the figuration in which it was taken; the set-and-setting pertaining to different social conditions.

The counter-culture movement's challenge to established elites was made possible by normative equalisation conflicts pertaining to functional democratisation and informalisation that had gathered pace after the world wars. As Wouters (2007: 185) documents, '[i]n the new phase of emancipation and resistance of the 1960s and 1970s, with entire groups rising socially, practically all relations became less hierarchical and formal. The emancipation and integration of large social groups within welfare states coincided with informalisation: the regime of manners rapidly lost rigidity and hierarchical aloofness. Many modes of conduct that formerly had been forbidden came to be allowed'. This challenge met a divided response. In some quarters, the codes and practices of rising groups were absorbed and integrated, a continuation of informalisation; in others they were met with a drive to stamp them out.

These competing responses recall the integration conflicts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries between rising bourgeois and falling aristocratic strata, and their

rival egalitarian-humanist and princely-Machiavellian codes, that Elias analysed. The mixing of such codes, Elias and Linklater have argued, became a central feature of the habitus of members of Western states, holding naked self-interest in a shifting tension with wider emotional identification (Elias, 2013; Linklater, 2016). Elias's account of the recurrent fusion of upper- and rising-class codes also helps explain the ambivalence of established responses: the stricter affect-control of dominant groups served as a mark of distinction, so that any 'letting go' was disapproved of, and the disapproval sharpened precisely as the rising group's power and numbers grew and competition between the groups intensified (Elias, 2012a).

This is, in part, what unfolded in the 1960s. Established disapproval of psychedelics, dressed increasingly in the language of science, hardened into a narrative in which the dangers of these substances, whether real, exaggerated or invented, became dominant; and, as we might expect of a narrative driven principally by status fear, the balance within it tended heavily towards fantasy. The users of psychedelics, and the outsider groups with which they were identified, became locked with established groups in a double-bind in which elite fear generated collective fantasy, including the scientific-ideological stigmatisation of the substances, which in turn appeared to justify those fears. As Elias and Scotson (2008: 19–20) put it, stigmatisation 'reflects and, at the same time, justifies the aversion – the prejudice – its members feel towards those of the outsider group… [T]he social stigma that its members attach to the outsider group transforms itself in their imagination into a material stigma – it is reified'. The War on Drugs would achieve this material reification of stigma precisely through enshrining it within government policy.

The War on Drugs: reformalisation and integration conflicts

The association of LSD and psychedelics with the counter-cultural movement and other outsider groups was central to the punitive reaction that followed. In the United States, the Controlled Substances Act (1970) placed psychedelics in Schedule I as drugs of abuse with no accepted medical use, followed shortly by the founding of the Drug Enforcement Administration in 1973. American drug policy then and now was more generally hegemonic globally. In Britain, following the American example, the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) classified psychedelics as Class A controlled substances and, under the Regulations that followed in 1973, placed them alongside cannabis in Schedule 4. In later legislation, notably the Misuse of Drugs Regulations (1985), they moved to Schedule 1 – the most restrictive category, reserved for drugs deemed to have no therapeutic value, requiring a Home Office licence even for research purposes.

From the vantage point of the present, such developments appear as involving a rapid and sudden clampdown. However, the stigmatisation of substances and their users through a fusion of racial and status anxiety has a much longer sociogenesis (see Farrimond and Michael, 2026). Such changes in policy typically follow what Reinarman (1994) called 'drug scares', in which a substance is cast as the singular cause of social problems that have other roots. Such scares fuse and ultimately conflate anxiety about marginalised and, particularly in the US case, often racialised groups. In the United States, the anti-opium campaigns of the 1870s and 1880s, which produced San Francisco's opium-den ordinance of 1875, were inseparable from agitation against Chinese immigrants; the early-1900s panic over 'cocainised' Black men in the South furnished part of the rhetorical groundwork for the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act of 1914; and the 'reefer madness' of the 1930s attached itself to Mexican immigrants and to African American musicians (Musto, 1999; Reinarman, 1994).

As psychedelics came to be used more widely, they were increasingly labelled as dangerous in a manner that was similar to how drugs such as cannabis, cocaine and the opiates had been culturally figured: the decisive characteristic was not simply the substance but the company it kept; the principal dangers were as much social as pharmacological. Read over the longer term, the War on Drugs is best understood not so much as a free-standing policy but as a social reaction among established groups to the informalising, equalising pressures of the preceding period: a reformalising counter-spurt, channelled through legislation and enforcement, and aimed, in its effects if not always its letter, at outsider groups: Black people, Hispanic people, hippies, youth cultures, the poor and others who had been the bearers of those pressures. Mennell (2007) has observed the same backlash as the seedbed of the American culture wars: a contrapuntal pull towards rigid, traditional codes running alongside the trend to flexibility and tolerance; the War on Drugs is an enduring part of that counter-movement. Historians of American conservatism have identified opposition to Black emancipation, anti-communism, defence of the nuclear family, anti-feminism and anti-secularisation as central to this conservative reaction (Zelizer, 2010): a reassertion of a particular kind of nationalist habitus against more egalitarian, cosmopolitan and emancipatory codes of rising strata.

Charting the British press across these decades serves to highlight aspects of the diachronic pattern (see Appendix A). From the mid-1960s, headlines fused a scientific-ideological attack on the substances with the stigmatisation of the groups associated with them: hippies, New Age travellers, ravers. As Goode (2008: 539–540) argues, LSD was widely seen as dangerous because, rather than the reasons the moral panic suggested, it represented a danger to the hegemony of the middle-class work ethic, morality and

world view. Leary became a folk devil. As Brecher and the Editors of Consumer Reports (1972: 369) report, the chair of the New Jersey Narcotic Drug Study Commission declared LSD "the greatest threat facing the country today… more dangerous than the Vietnam war". The science enlisted in this cause was frequently poor and sometimes involved fabrication. The widely reported claim that LSD damaged chromosomes was discredited, and the same skew of research funding towards harms rather than benefits, in the political climate of prohibition, deepened the double-bind. The pattern recurred almost exactly some years later with the MDMA scare. Flawed work on monkeys claiming the drug caused severe brain damage, later found to have administered methamphetamine to most of the test animals by mistake, was published in *Science* in 2002 and retracted in 2003 (Ricaurte et al., 2002), but had already generated a major impact in the popular press, where in the UK it compounded a moral panic that had crystallised around the death of the teenager Leah Betts in 1995. Only incrementally, and unevenly, has the fantasy-laden balance of this knowledge begun to shift.

However, over time, the shape of the social reaction to psychedelics has shifted in important respects. The moral panic of the 1960s targeted a counter-culture that, to varying degrees, believed in something: a spiritual and communitarian movement with a utopian programme. The panics of the 1980s and 1990s, around acid house, raves and the New Age traveller convoys, the Battle of the Beanfield in 1985, Castlemorton in 1992, targeted something the press increasingly cast as nihilistic and anomic: an outsider culture that believed in nothing and merely wanted to get *out of control.* As we shall show, while such targets were not 'real' in the sense of accurately defining the groups in question, they were 'real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas, 1928). Indeed, many of the spiritual and communitarian codes of the 1960s persisted into subsequent decades, and into the more recent renaissance. However, the communitarian and spiritual impulses of the earlier movement were progressively, if unevenly, diluted – alloyed with, and for some, supplemented by, more individualistic and hedonistic codes; notably in a setting shaped by the decimation of working-class communities under Reaganism and Thatcherism, against and within which the MDMA-driven acid house and rave scene formed. Over time, that is to say, the counter-cultural impulse became more individualised; and, as we will show, such individualised codes later came to be refigured into the libertarian register of a claimed 'right to try'[5]: the right to *put what I*

[5] The Right to Try Act (formally the *Trickett Wendler, Frank Mongiello, Jordan McLinn, and Matthew Bellina Right to Try Act of 2017*, Pub. L. No. 115-176, 132 Stat. 1372 (2018)) was signed into federal law by President Donald Trump on 30 May 2018. It permits eligible patients with life-threatening diseases or conditions who have exhausted approved treatment options and are unable to participate in a clinical trial to access certain investigational treatments that have completed a

want into my own body. This spiral of informalisation and reformalisation, in psychedelics as elsewhere, was less a movement back and forth than a continuous development involving oppositional components which engendered new combinations of normative codes.

The renaissance: from dropping out to dropping in

The scientific psychedelic renaissance that, as we discussed in the opening sections of this paper, is widely held to date from Griffiths and colleagues' 2006 study, and which gathered institutional weight through the 2010s, ran some way ahead of the cultural one. This raises the question of why this lag occurred, particularly if we are to explain, at least in part, the reascendant cultural traction of psychedelics as following from scientific discovery. At one level, we might expect some degree of 'lag' for 'public opinion'[6], to the extent that we might meaningfully refer to it, to catch up. The latter is typically slow to change, partly as a consequence of what Elias referred to as the 'drag effect' of habitus (Elias, 2010).

Phase I clinical trial but have not received full FDA approval. While the Act was centrally framed around life-threatening illness, its underlying logic—that treatment decisions should rest primarily with patients, supported by their physicians—reflects a broader emphasis on individual autonomy that has also informed libertarian arguments concerning drug policy and access to psychedelic treatments.

[6] The question of what constitutes 'the public' in drug policy discourse is itself a sociologically significant one. As Elias observed in his analysis of British public opinion (Elias, 2008), 'public opinion' is not a homogeneous entity but a contested figuration, differently constituted across social groups with unequal power chances to define its content. Again, the limitations of terms such as 'moral majority' and Becker's (1963) 'moral entrepreneurs' are relevant here—as we note above, neither captures the differential in power chances between groups whose interests come to be expressed in, and partly reproduced through, drug policy. The point is illustrated with some precision by David Nutt's account of his dismissal as chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs by then Home Secretary Alan Johnson in 2009. When Nutt argued that public opinion supported an evidence-based approach to drug classification, Johnson's reported response was, in effect, that this was the 'wrong public'—the 'right public', it was implied, being the readership of newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* (Nutt, 2012). It is partly for this reason that our own evidential examples of shifting public orientations towards psychedelics are drawn from that newspaper: its readership constitutes, in Johnson's telling formulation, the hegemonically imagined 'public' against whose canons drug policy has characteristically been calibrated.

As we have suggested earlier in our discussion, that such changes came to be possible involved a complex convergence of a range of interrelated processes. Firstly, the new wave of psychedelic research was not just conducted at leading American universities; it was being applied, strikingly (as in the subsequent Griffiths et al. study of 2016), to the end-of-life distress of cancer patients – an application that was near impossible to assimilate to the figure of the hedonistic drop-out. Secondly, the reformalising counter-spurt against the hippies and ravers had, by the early 2010s, largely run its course. Such groups no longer figured prominently as counter-cultural forces, and were no longer prominent 'folk devils' in the popular imagination.

Thirdly, the new wave of research was oriented, increasingly, towards making people 'normal' rather than towards transcending 'normality', and while, again, this echoed certain aspects of the earlier research of the 1950s, this coincided with a more general mental health crisis, partly linked to an increasing dissatisfaction with 'big pharma' and the over-use of SSRIs to treat mental health conditions (Kirsch, 2010). Finally, at around the same time, microdosing rose to prominence – a practice explicitly about enhancement and self-optimisation, about becoming a better version of oneself, and conspicuously not about becoming out of control (see Hughes et al., 2025b). Together these developments allowed for a cultural recasting of psychedelics as prospective civilising candidates.

Such developments can be seen through a quite rapid shift in the British popular press (see Appendix B). The low point is instructive: in 2012 the story of the 'Miami cannibal' gained considerable traction. The story pertains to a man who attacked another and chewed off part of his face, whilst allegedly high on a 'new form of LSD' which was said to be part of a wider cocktail of substances ingested that included 'bath salts'. The toxicology report released weeks later found only cannabis, and explicitly ruled out LSD (NPR, 2012). The episode coalesces the fantasy pole of the double-bind: monstrous conduct reflexively attributed to a psychedelic, the attribution then quietly falsified.

However, within two years newspapers that had run such stories were asking whether magic mushrooms might be the key to treating depression. By the end of the decade, lead headlines asked whether hallucinogens might be the new middle-class treat. More recently, a series of stories profiled Silicon Valley biohackers and ayahuasca-and-depression studies in tones of cautious enthusiasm for a new 'breakthrough'. The headlines that had marked psychedelics as the property of dangerous outsiders now marked them as routes to a better, more productive, more 'civilised', typically white and middle-class self (see George et al., 2020).

The case of microdosing further illustrates this development. Where, as we have shown, in the 1960s psychedelics were taken as a sacrament, totem and means, among others, to escape the self and the social order that confined it – to turn on, tune in and drop out – the microdose was characteristically taken to repair and optimise the self within that order, *to drop back in*. Microdosing represents a significant development in the understanding and use of psychedelics, from drugs of self-transcendence towards technologies of the self that promote wellness, enhance performance and combat the ills and 'price' (Kuzmics, 1989) of 'civilisation', returning one to 'normal' from various dysphoric states; a hedonic register sometimes persisting within, and increasingly amalgamated into, certain of these frames (Hughes et al., 2025b; Vrecko, 2010). Even organised retreats involving full doses are increasingly recast and repackaged as routes to better selfhood. The practice is more controlled than its counter-cultural predecessor, but the salient point is not control as such; it is that the control is aimed towards making 'normal' the 'abnormal', towards maintaining rather than escaping self-government.

In our interview-based study, the alloy of codes that runs through the whole history becomes especially pronounced in some participants' accounts. Informalised framings liberated in the counter-cultural moment were mixed with more formalised, clinical scientific ones; the opposition between hedonic and therapeutic uses is likewise collapsed. For example, Carol[7] described her microdosing of psychedelics as 'hugely therapeutic and it's for enjoyment purposes as well' (MD108). However, other participants drew a sharp moral line between therapeutic and recreational uses: 'There are those that use substances illegally, obtain them illegally, and get off their heads. And there are people like me who would take small amounts to control pain' (MD115). Dianne is here drawing a distinction between what 'they' (others/outsiders) do ('get off their heads') and what 'we' (people like me) do: use small amounts to manage pain. The 'battle lines' of the War on Drugs are redrawn in terms of practices of the self through a combination of normative codes pivoting on a middle-class work ethic and individualised self-care and the growing evidence relating to clinical research into psychedelics.

For other participants, such codes, particularly those clustered around wellness, intermingle with a more explicitly anti-pharmaceutical sentiment. That sentiment itself draws on an amalgamation of reality-congruent knowledge about the exploitative practices of global pharmaceutical corporations (Herzberg, 2020) and more conspiratorial, fantasy-based framings. This was captured by Lisa, who remarked: 'I

[7] We have used pseudonyms to protect the identity of our participants.

only believe in natural medicines. I'm against the pharma industry. I think that we are paying to be kept sick'. She added: 'And people that take them recreationally, and sit with friends, can't get that therapeutic benefit from them because you are not able to close your eyes and go within your own mind' (MD123).

Lisa's first observation reflects a broader tendency within wellness culture to figure the 'natural' as inherently healthier and more trustworthy than its pharmaceutical counterpart. Her second is equally revealing: it locates therapeutic benefit within a thoroughly bounded and self-enclosed interiority – a *homo clausus* conception of the mind as a private chamber into which one retreats, rather than as something constituted through and shaped by social relations. From this standpoint, genuine therapeutic work can only occur in solitude and inwardness; the social setting becomes, in some ways, a distraction.

Microdosing protocols and the structured psychedelic retreats that have risen to popularity over the past decade (Neitzke-Spruill et al., 2025) incorporate strong formalised components, tempered in part with rules relating to dose, schedule and intention, that now operate alongside the persistently hedonic practices of the rave and the festival, in a multitude of amalgams. The loosening of the War on Drugs double-bind that this entails is reciprocal and self-reinforcing: growing clinical evidence legitimates lay practices, while the proliferation and visibility of those practices presses governments towards research- and harm-reduction-based approaches, which in turn generate further evidence. The risk inherent in this loosening mirrors an older one: as the fantasy that cast psychedelics as poison recedes, a fresh fantasy that casts them as panacea gathers, much as it did around Leary, to form a new compound of fantasy and reality-congruence unfolding now within a twenty-first-century figuration shaped by social media, the entrenchment of culture wars, the rise of the populist right, the expansion of wellness culture and the rapid circulation of conspiracy.

Conclusion: curious bedfellows – libertarian-authoritarian psychedelia

The scene in the Oval Office with which we opened our discussion is, on the face of it, a strange one. In it, we see a populist president fast-tracking access to psychedelics for the treatment of serious mental illness, flanked by an anti-vaccine health secretary and a podcaster, who jokes about taking some himself. Substances once synonymous with egalitarian and emancipatory values which were formerly emblems and sacraments for collective dissent from centres of American power have become, in those very power centres, embraced by the populist right.

To make sense of this, we have argued that psychedelics, like all drugs, are not defined by their psychoactive properties alone, but through and in motile figurations of substances, uses, understandings and experiences. They are, to adopt the terminology and arguments of Pace and Devenot (2021), 'pluripotent', carrying in themselves less an intrinsic ideological valence than the potential to amplify the political 'set and setting' within which they are deployed. Thus, used within an egalitarian, mutually identifying figuration, they may deepen identification across group boundaries. Conversely, taken within an exclusionary, hierarchical figuration organised around a sharp authoritarian and exclusionary we-image, they may further entrench and compound such orientations.

The libertarian psychedelia represented by Trump and his coterie is, we have argued, best apprehended as a recent phase in a spiral of formalising and informalising 'spurts' in the longer-term 'civilising' (and de-civilising) of psychedelics. The counter-cultural communitarianism of the 1960s has not so much been displaced as come to exist alongside, and partly given way to, the individualising and hedonistic codes of the 1980s and 1990s, a counter-cultural libertarianism. That said, the communitarian and spiritual dimensions of rave culture, too, were substantial, and the hedonism of the 1960s hardly negligible. What the moral panics of each era cast as nihilistic and anomic was, in both cases, something of a caricature; albeit one that was, again to invoke Thomas and Thomas, real in its consequences – shaping the figurational dynamics through which these codes developed. Such developments have, more recently, increasingly come to involve a hybrid of normative codes from established and outsider groups: an establishment of the anti-establishment. Robert F. Kennedy Jr is an emblematic figure in this respect: positioning himself, as the populist right has done more generally, as oppositional to a corrupt establishment (invoking conspiratorial framings such as the 'deep state' and the liberal-pharma-industrial complex) while occupying one of its commanding offices. In such a case, the normative codes of outsider groups are absorbed, incorporated and in part transformed by established groups.

Such combinations of alternative, outsider, anti-established, anti-modern, nature-mystical codes with those of established authoritarian groups are, historically, not without precedent. The broader *Lebensreform* current of the early twentieth century, with its nature-worship, vegetarianism and romantic anti-modernism, fed both progressive and *völkisch* political directions; German National Socialism itself absorbed strands of nature-mysticism and the occult. More recently, the mixing of codes on display at *Stand in the Light* (standinthelight.uk) – a British wellness festival organised by the founder of the far-right conspiracy publication *The Light* – is part of the same development. Its visual identity draws freely on psychedelic fonts, colours and

iconography; its programme combines foraging, yoga, ecstatic dance, breathwork and workshops entitled 'Become Your Own Doctor' and 'Listen to the Plants' with anti-vaxxer music. A featured promotional video pans across the campsite, stalls and placards reading 'Gender Ideology is a Cult' while a festival performer sings lyrics such as 'Fuck you and your jab' and 'You think you're king in charge of our bodies'. The counter-cultural aesthetic is intact; yet the politics have merged and ideologically migrated. At the same time, such groups, in order to prop up their ideological convictions, adopt a form of bricolage, cherry-picking certain scientific research papers which appear to support their practices and beliefs. For example, those papers that highlight the dangers of Covid vaccinations, or those that highlight the benefits of microdosing.

This convergence has been in part accelerated by the post-Covid circulation of conspiracy theories, drawing the populist right, parts of the New Age and wellness milieu and a wider anti-pharma sentiment into overlapping, if unstable, alliances (Liekefett et al., 2023). As such, libertarian-authoritarian psychedelia carries an exclusivity, a hierarchy and an authoritarianism that distinguish it from the equalising impulse of the 1960s. It stands in a complex relation to the War on Drugs: at once continuous with its moralised governance of the self, yet opposed to its prohibitions.

We have argued that in order to explain such developments, it is necessary to look beyond accounts that foreground either scientific discovery or neoliberalism as a kind of explanatory juggernaut. Explaining the recent psychedelic renaissance solely as a matter of scientific discovery mistakes a shift in social canons for a fact about molecules: such an account cannot explain its own conditions of possibility – why the same findings are dismissed in one period and embraced in another, or why, as Goudsblom and Pinell's work suggests, scientific breakthroughs tend to be recognised as such only once prevailing normative codes have shifted sufficiently to make them permissible.

The rival explanation – that psychedelics have re-ascended because they have become reconcilable with neoliberal capitalism, absorbed into the therapeutic-wellness complex as yet another technology of the productive self – is more sophisticated and holds considerable analytical utility. The trajectory from counter-cultural sacrament to self-optimisation tool that we trace in this paper does indeed broadly track the period in which the 1960s counter-capitalist impulse was first desublimated (Marcuse, 2002 [1964]), then systematically reincorporated through market logics that colonised the aesthetics and sensibilities of counter-cultural dissent (see, for example, Frank, 1997; Florida, 2002).

However, to attribute the psychedelic renaissance to 'neoliberalism' is to invoke, in compressed form, a sophisticated historical materialist account: that these substances become permissible when they can be made to serve accumulation, and that the apparent liberation on offer is another form of capitalist accommodation. The problem is not that this argument is wrong but that it is always 'already right'. It is economically determinist in the precise sense that the answer is given in advance; whatever the empirical texture of the process, the conclusion is the same. Moreover, it can only reductively account for the pressures from below that have been central to this story: the microdosers and retreaters and Reddit communities who developed, circulated and authorised their practices well outside market logics, and whose figurational dynamics were not reducible to the interests of any accumulating class.

We have argued that the social development of psychedelics has tracked the shifting behavioural and emotional standards of American and European societies, and the changing balances of power they express, more closely than it has tracked either the state of the evidence or the imperatives of capital. The complexity we have traced consists, more exactly, in three interwoven developments. It is, first, a matter of simultaneity rather than succession: formalising and informalising pressures have operated concurrently and upon one another, in a spiral and not a pendulum, so that psychedelics could be formalised in psychiatry while informalising in youth culture, suppressed by prohibition while flourishing in the rave, and reformalised in the clinic and the microdosing protocol while still circulating in the festival. Similar processes are at play in terms of 'stigmatisation' and 'destigmatisation' of those who use such substances (see Farrimond and Michael, 2026). It is, second, a matter of the continual commingling and alloying of codes – clinical, hedonic, spiritual, prohibitionist, wellness-oriented, libertarian and now authoritarian – borne by groups whose power chances have shifted in relation to one another across the whole period, so that the present landscape contains, side by side and often within a single person, codes that were once the property of antagonistic camps. And it is, third, a matter of the shifting compound of fantasy and reality-congruence through which psychedelics have been known: a double-bind in which the fears attached to outsider groups and the fears attached to the substances reinforced one another, and which has only begun, unevenly and reversibly, to loosen – with its own characteristic risk that the substances are now recast as panacea as readily as they were once cast as poison.

Running through all three is what we have conceptualised as *pharmaceuticalisation from below*: the uptake of substances repurposed as pharmaceuticals driven not by the industry or the clinic but by lay users operating beyond, and often well ahead of, both. To understand the Trump executive order as a top-down event – the state finally catching

up with the science – is to miss what made it possible. The ground was prepared from below through the functional democratisation of medical knowledge and the partial redistribution of epistemic authority away from a clinical monopoly. These, as we have suggested, are long-term processes which have more recently found expression through deepening dissatisfaction with the pharmaceutical industry, catalysed by the opioid scandal, lending plausibility to the conviction that one is being kept sick for profit; through a mounting mental health crisis in the wake of the Covid pandemic and a growing backlash against pill-based psychiatry that made alternatives newly attractive; through citizen science and social media, which generated, circulated and authorised lay pharmacological expertise; and through hybrid conceptions of health that combine wellness discourses with neuroscience, so that the language of neuroplasticity came to underwrite practices once framed in purely spiritual terms. Accordingly, the boundary between recreation, spirituality, therapy and self-optimisation has become increasingly porous, and psychedelics have moved from the margin to a place within the reach of the quotidian self-maintenance of 'productive citizens'. When the Trump administration made its top-down move, it did so within a figuration that had already been partly transformed.

What a figurational account makes visible here – and what neither the discovery narrative nor the neoliberalism thesis can entirely accommodate – is the generative role of those transformations from below in producing the conditions for top-down change: not as the working-out of a logic of capital, nor as the belated recognition of pharmacological fact, but as a shifting of normative codes across multiple, intersecting figurations whose dynamics are irreducible to any single structural determinant. The pharmaceuticalisation of psychedelics from below is, in this sense, more than neoliberal capitalist accommodation. It is expressive of a longer-term 'civilising' of psychedelics – a process uneven, contested, reversible and never reducible to the interests of any single group – which has produced something genuinely new: a normative landscape in which the codes of outsiders and established have not so much reconciled as become, for the moment at least, mutually entangled.

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Appendix A: The stigmatisation of psychedelics and their users in the British press, 1966–1996

Table A1. The scientific-ideological attack on the substances

Headline	Newspaper	Date	Note
'Two in court on "vision of hell" drugs charge'	Daily Mail	7 April 1966	
'Dangers of LSD drug'	The Times	12 October 1967	Reports research in which baby hamsters developed birth defects after their mothers were injected with LSD; tied to the chromosome-damage claim
'LSD induces urge to kill, report says'	The Times	24 March 1970	
'LSD-taker acted like vampire, court told'	The Times	5 July 1974	
'New LSD peril'	Daily Mail	28 September 1987	Opens: 'Lethal LSD, the mind-bending hippy drug of the sixties…'
'Spy out the Acid menace'	Daily Mail	30 June 1989	
'Hooked by the deadly Ecstasy lie'	Daily Mail	31 August 1992	
'Fourth Form Crazy on LSD'	Daily Mail	3 February 1996	

“Party’s over as adverts target ‘soft’ drugs threat”	Daily Mail	23 February 1996	Campaigner claims ecstasy ‘can cause depression, anxiety, panic and permanent brain damage’

Table A2. The stigmatisation of users (hippies, New Age travellers, ravers)

Headline	Newspaper	Date	Note
‘Hippies jeered outside court’	Daily Mail	30 September 1969	
‘400 Police drive the hippies away’	Daily Mail	14 July 1976	
‘Summer plague’	Daily Mail	19 June 1985	
‘These foul pests must be controlled’	Daily Mail	27 May 1992	Castlemorton
“‘Spy’ force to tackle the hippies”	Daily Mail	30 May 1992	Castlemorton
“One mother’s extraordinary story of how she lost her daughter to the travellers”	Daily Mail	8 June 1993	An MP is quoted describing travellers as ‘New Age vermin’
‘Protest mob in the siege of Downing Street’	Daily Mail	25 July 1994	Criminal Justice Act protests

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Appendix B: The rehabilitation of psychedelics

Table B1: The rehabilitation of psychedelics in the British (and Anglophone) press, 2012–2026

Headline	Outlet	Date	Note
‘Miami man shot dead eating a man's face may have been on LSD-like drug’	The Guardian	29 May 2012	The nadir: LSD and ‘bath salts’ blamed; toxicology later found only cannabis
Are magic mushrooms the key to treating depression? Brain scans reveal psychedelic drug trips induce 'optimistic dream-like thinking'	Daily Mail	3 July 2014	First clearly positive turn after years of scare stories
Are psychoactive substances your new wine o'clock treat?	Daily Mail	24 June 2019	Wellness/hedonism blend; psychedelics as middle-class indulgence
Biohacker Bryan Johnson's experience taking psychedelic drugs	Daily Mail	12 November 2025	Optimisation/biohacking framing. Wellness technologies.
Just one dose of a controversial celeb-loved psychedelic could help treat	Daily Mail	18 February 2026	Therapeutic framing of DMT/ayahuasca in the popular press

depression, study suggests			

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