BLOWING GLASS AT STONE HOUSES

An Interview with Psychedelic Anticapitalist David Nickles

Brian Pace and Neşe Devenot

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The medicalization and commercialization of psychedelics stand to profit by drawing distinction and distance between their project and the contentious history of underground psychedelic use and culture. This serves at least two functions. First, by jettisoning countercultural baggage, psychedelic advocates signal a nonthreatening stance toward the power structures that enact and maintain the political and racial project of drug prohibition. Second, any problems that might be attributed to aspects of the drugs in question can neatly be associated with already stigmatized communities and individuals.

David Nickles has been an unapologetic defender of the contributions of underground research during the decades of prohibition and remains one of the earliest and loudest critics of corporate designs for psychedelic drugs. He continues to highlight the ironies and hypocrisies of the rapid transformation of a criminalized subculture into a multibillion-dollar professionalized industry. We pose some questions to the voice that continues to influence mainstream psychedelic narratives despite its uncompromising radical analysis.

David's work focuses on the social and cultural implications of psychoactive substances, using critical theory and structural analysis to examine the

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intersections of drugs and society. He is a vocal opponent of the mainstreaming and commodification of psychedelic compounds and rituals, believing that such approaches inherently obscure the liberatory potential of psychedelic experiences.

Brian Pace and Neşe Devenot: *How did you first get involved in analyzing the overlap of capitalism with psychedelic medicines? Why did this matter to you, and what were you concerned about?*

David Nickles: Well, first I'd say that I don't know that psychedelics are medicines, at least not in a totalizing sense. And I say this as someone who has experienced states of consciousness on psychedelics that I've found to be profoundly therapeutic or healing. Without going off on too much of a tangent, I've also found time in nature or dancing or immersing myself in artistic creations to be similarly therapeutic or healing. Personally, I'd resist labeling those experiences as "medicinal" or trying to cram them into the category of "medicine" in the sense of a scientific method (observe, question, hypothesize, experiment, conclude, etc.) aimed at providing care for a patient or developing interventions for a disease or injury.

With that said, my first mushroom trip is where I first consciously encountered the intersection of psychedelics and capitalism; I suppose you could think of it as some "experiential education" during my first year of university. Right as I was peaking, I came across a dead tree and the thought "dead tree" shot through my mind. But as soon as I'd had that thought, it was as though an external intelligence entered my mind and steered me to examine the tree, to look at how the trunk was covered in ants, beetles, moss, and fungi; a whole world of life was teeming on this "dead" tree. I felt broadsided by a realization that life and death are bound up in an ongoing dance, rather than being concrete distinctions that start or stop in any specific moment. As this revelation gave way to basking in its ecstatic implications, I felt the existential anxiety I'd carried since I was three years old (and forced to confront my grandmother's death head on) melt away.

As the anxiety evaporated, my attention turned back to questions of this dead tree in a small patch of forest on a college campus, and its role in the immediate ecosystem. Suddenly, I felt my consciousness project outward and reflect on the ecocidal tailspin of industrial civilization, the destruction of countless biological systems in pursuit of profits. I realized I was at school in order to secure papers in order to participate in this system, and I was confronted with psychedelic reflections on the reality of my position.

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What could I do? Perhaps I could drop out? I immediately reflected on the criminality of vagrancy and homelessness and the likely implications of taking that approach. My thoughts ricocheted to the idea of eking out an existence in the wilderness, maybe on the edge of a national forest. That line of thinking soon ran into Carl Sagan's *Pale Blue Dot* and the realization that even if I could manage some sort of feral existence, I would be just as doomed as the rest of spaceship Earth when the life-support systems failed as a result of the ongoing actions of industrial civilization and capitalism.

Ultimately, I landed on the understanding that the only option I had was to figure out how to resist these systems. To monkeywrench the things I understood to be destroying what I'd seen in the decaying log: our world's intricate and delicate dances of life and death. While I didn't have a deep analysis of capitalism at the time, I intuitively understood that the incentives of the system meant that it wasn't going to stop voluntarily, even if the consequences of its ongoing actions were at odds with sustaining life on the planet. As I came down from this experience, I was floored; not only was there a completely "other" world at the tip of my fingers (or the cap of a shroom, as it were), but that other world had offered insights into my daily life in ways that completely challenged some of my fundamental assumptions, and offered previously unfathomable catharsis with regard to my longest-held and deepest anxieties.

In the wake of that first experience, I devoured psychedelic literature and research, but I was also compelled to dive deep into radical analysis and histories. I read about the Weather Underground breaking Tim Leary out of jail, as well as their role in the Days of Rage protests. I breezed through Noam Chomsky's bibliography, amazed that the core realizations of my mushroom trip had been meticulously researched and validated in countless historical and contemporary examples. For me, psychedelic drugs had catalyzed radical insights about capitalism and dominant culture.

As I continued to explore psychedelics over the next five years, I also continued to explore these radical ideas. My drug use has always been inextricably woven into my intellectual interests, so it felt like a seamless progression in which my interests in political theory were applied to my psychedelic use, and my psychedelic experiences offered further insight and analysis into social and political relations.

I found a home, of sorts, on the DMT-Nexus—an internet forum that focuses on DMT and classical psychedelics and was known for its DIY and harm-reduction-focused ethos, massive repository of ethnobotanical information, and deep philosophical discussions. Alongside other forum members from around the world, we refined extraction techniques, asked questions about

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the hows and whys of different psychedelic effects, and ran a whole bunch of plants through gas chromatography–mass spectrometry and high-performance liquid chromatography—inadvertently creating the most comprehensive database about plants that were available on the ethnobotanical market at the time. After I had gained some small notoriety for helping to coordinate this underground phytochemical research into ayahuasca and other psychedelic preparations, I was invited to give talks about cultural and political issues relevant to psychedelics. I found myself drawn toward questions about the project of psychedelic medicalization. I was initially concerned with commodification, gurus and thought leaders, legacies of abuse, and the risks of enmeshing psychedelics in the dysfunctional and profit-driven institutions of dominant culture.

At that time, hardly anyone was engaging with these issues publicly. In my attempts to bring these concerns to the fore, I found two things: people who were taking psychedelics were eager to discuss the issues, while medicalization proponents seemed ill-equipped to address my concerns or engage in robust debate about the problems I had identified. I increasingly believed that when it came to psychedelic medicalization, the emperor was naked. Or to put it in a nonmetaphorical sense, medicalization was simply a political project to secure limited legalization, and its proponents weren't equipped to engage with critiques of their project's shortcomings, blind spots, and risks.

By the time 2018 rolled around and I caught wind of COMPASS Pathways, I had a body of work addressing the intersection of psychedelics, capitalism, and radical politics, as well as numerous connections with researchers at the leading psychedelic research organizations. I realized that I was perfectly positioned to mount opposition to an emerging wave of corporate psychedelia. By that time, I had started blowing glass in order to pay the bills. It allowed me to pursue psychedelic projects with financial independence from psychedelia: my livelihood and my ideas were separate. I figured if I didn't owe my food, clothes, and shelter to my psychedelic projects, I would be more free to say what I wanted.

I came out guns blazing against COMPASS, offering the earliest comprehensive critiques and analysis of what, exactly, corporate psychedelia (later, corporadelia) would mean for psychedelic communities and subcultures. The reasons I cared enough to take time away from work and pour my resources into this counteroffensive were many. But to put it most simply, I had seen capitalism's efficacy in exploiting and ultimately destroying socially fulfilling subcultures, life-giving ecosystems, and the joy of participating in the divine mystery of existence—and I very much didn't want to see that happen to psychedelics.

BP and ND: *Where do you see parallels of this overlap (capitalism intersecting with psychedelics) in history?*

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DN: Maybe it's worth offering some definitions, as I've been accused at various points of using "capitalism" to mean "things I don't like." So perhaps a simple definition of capitalism might be: an economic and political system based on private property rights, in which trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit. Keeping things simple, we could contrast that with systems in which workers own the means of production and share the profits, and private property rights are not foundational. It's probably also worth offering a distinction between private property and personal property, for which I'll borrow from the ACME Collective's "N30 Black Bloc Communiqué," released after the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle:

> Private property should be distinguished from personal property. The latter is based upon use while the former is based upon trade. The premise of personal property is that each of us has what s/he needs. The premise of private property is that each of us has something that someone else needs or wants. In a society based on private property rights, those who are able to accrue more of what others need or want have greater power. By extension, they wield greater control over what others perceive as needs and desires, usually in the interest of increasing profit to themselves.

So if we come back to the intersection of psychedelics and capitalism, what we're looking at is a few billionaire corporadelic heads (and their lackeys) working to build an industry on the backs of psychedelic medicalization narratives in service to accruing both wealth and social control. While they claim to be doing this for some greater good, we must keep in mind that that science has yet to show safety and efficacy in well-designed clinical trials, and that these companies—which exist in order to return profit to shareholders and act according to that logic—would have the power to dispense or withhold psychedelics in contexts they ultimately control.

I think it's also important to take a moment and talk about commodification, or the process of turning things or concepts into objects of trade, and ascribing to them an economic value that can supplant social values and relationships that may have previously existed around those items or ideas. If we examine the history of psychedelia and the social relationships that have surrounded these drugs and their use, we can see that recent psychedelic medicalization and the industry that has sprung up around it have resulted in unprecedented psychedelic commodification, well beyond the more limited commodification that has existed for decades around psychedelic retreats, shamanic/drug tourism, or even simple drug dealing.

In order to turn psychedelics into medical commodities, there has been a concerted effort to change the narratives surrounding psychedelics in an attempt

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to make them appear less transgressive or more respectable. I think Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's concept of "respectability politics"—or attempts to demonstrate that personal and/or subcultural values are continuous with those of dominant culture—is helpful here. Within psychedelic spaces, people have been playing with respectability politics for decades. One particularly clear example is research organizations pandering to the police and the military's desire to treat PTSD (and thus protect their hefty investment in trained officers and soldiers) in order to shoehorn psychedelics into contexts that are heartily endorsed by the state. I dug into this subject and tried to illuminate a number of the issues at hand in an article titled "We Need to Talk about MAPS Supporting the Police, the Military, and Violent White Supremacism" [*Psymposia*, July 17, 2020; https://www.psymposia.com/magazine/acab/].

I think that some of these dynamics are similar to what Douglas Rushkoff observed about media and marketing way back in the 2001 PBS Frontline documentary "The Merchants of Cool":

> Since the 1960s, mainstream media has searched out and co-opted the most authentic things it could find in youth culture, whether that was psychedelic culture, anti-war culture, blue jeans culture. Eventually heavy metal culture, rap culture, electronica—they'll look for it and then market it back to kids at the mall.

In the case of psychedelics, I'd suggest this co-optation is both more pernicious and more totalizing. Now companies that operate ketamine clinics are trying to figure out how to market their drugs to soccer moms and frontline health care workers, free of the stigma historically associated with people taking dissociatives in less "controlled" settings, like festivals or raves, irrespective of the fact that the science doesn't support the "treatments" these clinics are offering.

Obvious parallels stand out in music, such as the commodification of hip-hop and punk (both of which started out in contexts that were explicitly at odds with commodification), or the commodification and mass marketing of revolutionary figures like Bob Marley and Che Guevara. Rather than getting into the histories of commodification here, as it would take far too long to do them justice, I'd encourage people to think of examples from their own lives; the arts and interests that have brought joy, meaning, relief, or spiritual sustenance, and have suffered as those interests were commodified in various ways. As I started saying this, I suddenly found myself thinking of the recent controversy around Dungeons & Dragons that erupted when players learned that the company that owns the game was attempting to change the licensing agreement to have more control over (and profits from) player-created content. Now, I'm no D&D player, but it made a big splash in the news, and I suspect, considering that all of us live

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within capitalism, most people can probably think of examples from their own lives without too much effort.

With all of that said, I think there are far darker parallels with any context in which the same people responsible for various problems are the ones promoting and selling solutions. It's probably worth noting that this is a common occurrence within capitalism more broadly. Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* is an excellent treatment of this subject and, incidentally, opens with a discussion of MK-ULTRA and the uses and abuses of psychedelics by the US government in service to CIA objectives, ultimately leading to the development of torture techniques used at various "black sites" during the so-called War on Terror.

In examining capitalism at a systems level, we can see this fundamental dynamic of the ruling class profiting off of problems and solutions in the tension between billionaire tax avoidance and philanthropic projects. As economist Rutger Bregman publicly chastised attendees at the 2019 Davos World Economic Forum,

> I hear people talking the language of participation, justice, equality and transparency but almost no one raises the real issue of tax avoidance, right? And of the rich just not paying their fair share. It feels like I'm at a firefighters conference and no one's allowed to speak about water. I mean this is not rocket science … we can talk for a very long time about all these stupid philanthropy schemes … we've got to be talking about taxes. That's it. Taxes, taxes, taxes. All the rest is bullshit in my opinion.

If we look at the billionaires involved in the current wave of corporadelic ventures, we find people like Peter Thiel, Sam Altman, and Christian Angermayer, each of whom has engaged in profoundly antisocial behaviors "at scale" (to borrow their language). I'll give the briefest of rundowns here, but the following will hardly scratch the surface. Thiel has supported numerous fascist and white supremacist causes and actors, in addition to objecting to the notion of women securing the right to vote and identifying the 1920s "gilded era" as "the last decade in American history during which one could be genuinely optimistic about politics." Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI (the company behind the ChatGPT artificial intelligence chatbot) has authored screeds against political correctness while refusing to give insight into the models his chatbot has been trained on (technologies and practices that leading AI ethics researchers like Timnit Gebru have strongly warned against), meaning that outsiders have no solid insight as to the technology's various biases, shortcomings, and the likelihood that it will engage in racism, misogyny, or other harmful behavior.

Meanwhile, Christian Angermayer sits on the Presidential Advisory Council to murderous Rwandan dictator Paul Kagame. He's also involved in all sorts of

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mining operations, from lithium to bitcoin, with disastrous ecological and social ramifications across the board. He was hugely vocal about "reopening the economy" during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, while simultaneously pushing hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin as COVID treatments, and dismissing those who urged caution and the need for more research, all of which the Psymposia team covered in our article "Dear Psychedelic Researchers" [by Plus Three, April 4, 2020, https://www.psymposia.com/magazine/dear-psychedelic-researchers/].When it turned out that hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin weren't effective against COVID, he pivoted to comparing COVID to other pandemics and plagues, ostensibly in an attempt to indicate that COVID wasn't so bad, relatively speaking. More recently, Angermayer has even commented, "Unfortunately, I deeply believe that the world we're building, with all the technology—and I'm part of the builders, this is why I'm so conscious of that—is not good for our mental health." [January 16, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbcuFOBV8dM] So he positions himself to profit off of mental health by-products of the world he's boasted of building, while incorporating a variety of concerning technological components into those treatments.

If we look at the past actions that these billionaires have engaged in, we don't need much of a crystal ball to understand where psychedelic medicalization is heading. All three of these leading (if somewhat shadowy) corporadelic figures are heavily involved in data technologies, which are very much where medical psychedelics are going: wearables, AI-assisted therapy and treatment planning, apps integrated into treatment, digital biomarkers, and a whole slew of other concepts that feel as if they've been ripped from the midst of one of Philip K. Dick's paranoia-and-amphetamine-fueled-three-day-writing sessions.

History is rich in examples of technological and medical abuses of power, from Cambridge Analytica (in which Thiel's company Palantir was involved) and Facebook's manipulation of teenage users' moods and behavior via their newsfeeds, to the case of Henrietta Lacks and the Tuskegee syphilis study. These examples help us understand the historical realities—and the stakes—at the intersection of health care, data, and capitalism. We must learn from these examples and apply that learning, because psychedelic surveillance capitalism isn't just on its way—the early iterations are already here. It combines algorithmic tools aimed at behavior modification (see Shoshanna Zuboff's seminal work on the subject) with the suggestibility-enhancing power of psychedelics.

BP and ND: *Have you received institutional or industry pushback for discussing this overlap?*

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DN: I've received considerable pushback for trying to highlight these dynamics. Perhaps the most notable instance to date was Rick Doblin flying out to participate in a conference at the last minute in 2018 so that he could "rebut" my commentary. I think one of the more amusing aspects of that instance was that he didn't know what I was going to say ahead of time, he just knew he'd want to rebut whatever it might be.

More generally, I've found myself receiving pushback from both industry players and researchers who want to advance their careers on the backs of psychedelic medicalization and capitalist structures. One of the more common themes seems to be the idea that this is somehow "personal" rather than an informed position based on nearly two decades of research and refinement of my intellectual positions.

For instance, at the Entheogenesis Garden States conference in 2022, I was on a panel with a couple of corporadelic executives, and one of them said that he had the impression that people who were opposed to corporate psychedelia and/or capitalism had a habit of demonizing health care executives like himself and that he wasn't a bad person, he was interested in improving health care outcomes for patients.

When I was given the opportunity to speak, I pointed out that none of this is personal. Obviously, in the case of people like Thiel, Altman, and Angermayer, yes—who they are and what they've done help us understand what they might do next, but beyond that, there are systemic drivers to these dynamics. I made the point that if we wanted to imagine that the CEO of Apple was entirely ignorant of how iPhones are made, we could imagine taking him to the lithium and cobalt mines, to the refineries, to the sweatshops with suicide netting, and walk him through the entire production process. We could imagine his horror at the dawning realization of the cost in literal blood, sweat, and tears attached to every iPhone. We could imagine him going back to the board of directors and telling them about his revelation and the need for Apple to stop what it's doing. And we could imagine the board of directors looking at the profit projections and finding a new CEO. I pointed out that we could imagine walking the board of directors through the same process and making a plea to the shareholders, and the shareholders looking at the projected profits and giving the board the same treatment the board had given the CEO. This is the nature of systemic problems. The system simultaneously incentivizes and constrains behaviors in a manner that leads to certain outcomes, irrespective of who's at the helm and what their individual intentions (or principles) may be.

I looked the corporadelic executive in the eye and told him that I don't know anything about his intentions. I don't need to know anything about his intentions

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to understand the systemic dynamics that constrain the work he and his company are doing to bring "novel psychedelic compounds" through a "development pipeline" in order to treat "unaddressed mental health conditions." The reality is there's scant evidence that classic psychedelics (psilocybin, mescaline, LSD, etc.) or MDMA are effective medicines for any mental health conditions. Less than a thousand people have been involved in the entirety of modern clinical trials, which feature tiny sample sizes, laundry lists of methodological flaws, significant theoretical deficiencies, and glaring ethical blind spots. There's no need to demonize any corporadelic actor to point to the massive problems with the project of medicalizing psychedelics; the problems are systemic.

I think one of the things I've become fascinated with when offering such commentary or critiques directly to corporadelic actors is their inability and/or unwillingness to engage. After all, you'd think that, if the facts were on their side, it would be fairly straightforward to point to all the studies that show my critiques are without merit. Yet because those studies don't exist (and likely because they're not used to being asked to provide rigorous evidence for their claims), they end up engaging in ad hominem attacks against me.

For example, a prominent Australian psychiatrist who has made numerous public appearances to promote psychedelic-assisted therapy, has repeatedly claimed that "thousands of people" have been through clinical trials that show that psychedelic medicines are "safe and efficacious" as mental health interventions. However, when I challenged him on this claim, he replied that I seem "to hate doctors and the medicalization of psychedelics." When I pressed him to provide evidence for his assertion about "thousands of patients," he replied: "In terms of safety epidemiological studies show hundreds of thousands of people have taken psychedelics safely and that is more than a thousand. How many in your toad licking studies?" Setting aside his confusing follow-up question, which I assume was intended as some sort of insult, I think most people can recognize that "epidemiological studies" showing that psychedelics are relatively safe are vastly different from clinical trials aimed at determining the safety and efficacy of psychedelic-assisted therapies as interventions for mental health conditions. Here is a psychiatrist knowingly making misleading statements to the public, and then lashing out at me for daring to call him out on it.

While I've grown increasingly accustomed to these types of interactions over the past several years, I have to say that I think it reflects poorly on the state of the field and its proponents. It seems to me that as psychedelics are increasingly hailed as the future of mental health care and presented to a largely unsuspecting public (in an era of decreasing scientific literacy and increasing misinformation spread through social media platforms), there's a massive potential for harm here.

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And while I'm personally interested in understanding the "whys" behind this misinformation—whether it's a result of commercial/industry incentives to maximize profits by misrepresenting what we know about these drugs, or a more cult-like "true belief" that psychedelics can revolutionize human society and help "save the world"—I think it's most important to acknowledge that this kind of pushback damages the field and can harm vulnerable people seeking treatments for their mental health conditions.

If psychedelic researchers and advocates were willing to listen to and engage with critical perspectives, and treat them with serious academic rigor, I believe the field would be much stronger. In looking at the nearly forty-year project of psychedelic medicalization, we can find numerous critiques and scandals that have been swept under the rug or pushed into the closet. Consider serial sexual abuser Dr. Rick Ingrasci, the former golden boy of MDMA therapy for PTSD, who spoke to Congress in 1985 about the supposed benefits of MDMA therapy, and also abused terminally ill patients whom he had dosed with ketamine and MDMA. Or Salvador Roquet, the Mexican psychotherapist who tortured student dissidents for the Mexican secret police in the 1960s, using the same drugs and techniques he would later develop into a psychedelic "therapy" he called "psychosynthesis." It seems that the oft-repeated idea that "there's no such thing as a bad trip, only challenging experiences" may have originated from a Roquet-informed ideology that "bad trips may be the best trips."

As Lily Kay Ross has repeatedly noted, if—rather than avoiding engagement with these issues—the field were willing to examine how things have gone so horribly wrong, we might have a robust body of knowledge about preventing these harms. Instead, we have a litany of horror stories that are slowly coming to light and will likely continue to do so as advocates insist that it's more important to "protect the movement" than to have open, honest discussions about the real and present dangers that exist in the field. Similarly, the lack of theoretical debate and discussion around what constitutes good clinical practice when it comes to psychedelic-assisted therapy should be a major red flag, for both clinicians and industry players.

While people speak casually of "psychedelic-assisted therapy," the reality is that there are a multitude of different ideas about what this term actually means. There's minimal consensus across schools of thought, and even less theory or research into the clinical rationale underlying the various techniques commonly deployed (such as touch, or the use of blindfolds and headphones). When Lily and I interviewed the Chief of Therapy Training and Supervision for MAPS PBC, she was unaware of the various practices that the MAPS therapist handbook allows for. If the head of therapy training for the leading psychedelic research

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organization doesn't know what's included in the therapy, who does? This presents a host of questions about risks to and safety for trial participants and—if these interventions are approved—patients. In the event of approval, it also presents risks to corporadelic actors. After all, if your VC-backed psychedelic clinic doesn't know what psychedelic therapy is supposed to look like, how can it minimize harms to patients, avoid scandals, and ensure healthy financial returns to its investors?

Ironically, addressing these issues rather than pushing back against me (and others) for highlighting them would, theoretically, ensure more profitable business operations in the long term. The systemic obstacle is that it's far more expensive in the short term. And here we see similarities with other industries and regulation: If it's cheaper to dump toxic waste into a river and pay the fine for doing so than it is to completely retool a factory to comply with toxic waste regulations, then paying the fines for dumping toxic waste simply becomes a cost of doing business. The ecological destruction and poisoning of human beings and other life is viewed as an externality, not relevant to the factory's balance sheets. In the case of psychedelic-assisted therapy, it seems that the industry is setting itself up so that anything that happens to patients outside of the immediate clinical experience will be viewed as externalities, and patients will be left to fend for themselves (as was documented in the *Cover Story: Power Trip* podcast). This is potentially more profitable in the short term, but also indicates there will likely be a torrent of harmed parties coming forward as psychedelic medicalization continues racing forward without attending to the issues that inform my critiques.

BP and ND: *You've described your analysis as holding "explanatory power." What does that mean?*

DN: When I say my analysis has explanatory power, I mean that it suggests explanations for the things we encounter in the real world and accurately accounts for them. Both the explanations and analysis can be tested "in the wild," so to speak. It explains phenomena, and in doing so, it offers suggestions as to what we might expect to happen, and perhaps more importantly, it offers suggestions as to why those things might happen.

For me, this goes back to my first mushroom trip, which resulted in what I call my first "radical synthesis." Previously disparate or disconnected ideas and understandings about capitalism, industrial civilization, and dominant culture more broadly were brought into focus, and their interconnections were highlighted to me. When I came down, I was fascinated by the idea that these things were connected in fundamentally significant ways, and I began exploring if these connections were meritorious, and if so what the implications were. This led me to

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explore radical political thought (radical in the sense of getting at the "root" or the foundational principles of the ideas) and eventually to anarchist ideas and analyses of capitalism, industrial civilization, white supremacism, and dominant culture more broadly.

Much of the insight and understanding I've used to build out my critiques of corporadelia and psychedelic medicalization are rooted in anarchist theory and understandings of the world. This is one of the reasons I've semi-jokingly referred to my analysis as anarcho-psychonautica, as it presents anarchist tendencies within psychonautical contexts. It's also part of the reason my analysis focuses so much on questions of hierarchy, power, coercion, and liberation and orients itself toward dismantling systems of oppression.

I would suggest that a huge reason that the analysis I've advanced has such significant explanatory power is that it's an interdisciplinary model that doesn't treat psychedelics as exceptional to the dynamics encountered throughout other human endeavors, but rather, starts with the premise that psychedelia is subject to the same dynamics, and then explores how those dynamics might express themselves in particular psychedelic contexts. Because it draws from large theoretical bodies of work that have been developed over decades in response to questions that are both outside of, yet still relevant to psychedelia, there are treasure troves of discussion and debate that can inform psychedelic analysis and offer novel ways of thinking about psychedelic issues. The question is then one of how well the analysis maps onto the world around us, which is an ongoing process of refinement, but one that I think I and my colleagues at Psymposia have demonstrated can provide novel insight.

BP and ND: *In what ways have corporadelic developments matched with your expectations? Conversely, in what ways have you been surprised by recent developments?*

DN: I think this builds nicely on the prior question. In the talks I gave in 2018, I highlighted issues of patents, venture capital investor dynamics, pharmaceutical development dynamics, vertical integration, and anticompetitive practices, in addition to highlighting concerns about right-wing psychedelia, psychedelic surveillance capitalism, sexual misconduct by psychedelic researchers, and the use of psychedelics to further American militarism. Not only have the ongoing developments around all of these issues [since 2018] largely aligned with the concerns I voiced [then], these issues have consistently been front and center with regard to corporadelia [since 2018]. As I've commented elsewhere, I feel a bit like a psychedelic Cassandra.

I would contend that the high degree to which corporadelic developments have matched my expectations is a result of developing an analysis with explanatory

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power. It's frustrating to be able to point to this track record alongside the chorus of "wait and see" from countless psychedelic advocates who seem to think that psychedelics are so exceptional as to be immune from the dynamics at play across numerous other spheres of life (or industries). It's the same old song and dance, capitalism doing what it does, and I believe we should understand it as such and act accordingly.

I think the single most surprising thing, for me, is the disregard of many researchers and the media when it comes to discrepancies between the science and the hype. I'm not surprised that the industry players don't care. I'm not surprised that self-interested or would-be practitioners don't seem to care. I'm not surprised that the increasingly cultic advocacy organizations don't seem to care. But I am surprised that well-intentioned clinicians and researchers seem willing to turn a blind eye toward (or even justify) the misleading statements and questionable research practices that some of their colleagues engage in. I appreciated the public disagreement that played out in 2022 when some members of the Johns Hopkins psychedelic research team called out some of the researchers affiliated with Imperial College London for poor research practices and for making wildly inaccurate claims about their research to the press. I was surprised by that because it was at odds with the trends of keeping quiet, but I'd love to see more of it.

With that said, I'm also surprised that journalists are so willing to publish industry talking points without a second thought, and that compelling stories about the numerous harms and missteps of the field are so hard to get published. I've become numb to how most outlets and journalists appear unwilling to run corrections to address significant errors in their stories, such as when they misrepresent people's credentials or promote figures who have caused significant harm. When we find ourselves looking back at the disasters that have already unfolded around psychedelic medicalization (and those still to come), I think the media has to be understood as a major culprit. They let themselves be duped, and turned around and duped the public, too. That has already had serious consequences and will continue to do so.

BP and ND: *What topics would like to see scholars in the field pay greater attention to and why?*

DN: I think there are two big ones: the rampant problems within psychedelic clinical trials and psychedelic surveillance capitalism.

As part of our investigative podcast *Cover Story: Power Trip*, my colleague Lily Kay Ross and I helped release video footage of two MAPS therapists (Richard Yensen and Donna Dryer) assaulting a clinical trial participant (Meaghan Buisson) during her MDMA sessions in the MAPS phase 2 clinical trials for MDMA-

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assisted therapy for PTSD. This set of events—MAPS's failure to intervene and the responses to this abuse from people within psychedelic communities—is extremely concerning.

The footage circulated throughout psychedelic spaces, including psychedelic research spaces, and yet—as far as I'm aware—not a single psychedelic research group or institution publicly acknowledged or commented on the abuse evidenced in this footage with a formal statement (although Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy did author a formal statement). I believe that widespread silence was tremendously harmful, as I think it signaled to anyone who's been harmed that not even video evidence is enough to garner support or regulatory investigations. Furthermore, we highlighted evidence that MAPS had worked to cover up these abuses, as well as harms perpetrated by Yensen and Dryer that took place after the MDMA sessions. And the leading researchers and institutions in the field chose not to comment on that, either. I can't think of a single issue in the field more deserving of public engagement, and yet the actual engagement I've seen feels inversely proportional to the significance of these events.

Furthermore, in the podcast and subsequent articles, we highlighted a number of issues with psychedelic clinical trials, ranging from tiny sample sizes to methodological problems, data analysis, and massive problems with controlling variables and ensuring consistency across sites and sessions. Without that consistency, these studies cannot conclude that their findings are the result of MDMA, because the outcomes could actually be caused by other factors. There are simply too many variables in play to know. While there is some great work being done by people like Suresh Muthukumaraswamy that highlights these shortcomings, it falls short of addressing the full scope of these problems (and it shouldn't be the responsibility of lone researchers to tackle the entirety of the field's systemic problems).

The majority of the field seems focused on racing toward approval and then scaling these understudied "therapies" for a myriad of mental health indications. It would be great to see people pump the brakes and start to question what's really going on here. If medicalization is a Trojan horse for psychedelic decriminalization and/or legalization, I believe people would do better to emulate total drug decriminalization approaches, like Portugal's decriminalization model, or Oregon's Measure 110, rather than attempting to secure limited legalization for some drugs in medical contexts when the science just doesn't support it. While the scientific evidence doesn't support prohibition, that should be addressed by ending prohibition. The viability of medical psychedelics is an entirely separate question; one on which the jury is still out and which still requires rigorous scientific study, ideally with better oversight than we've seen to date.

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But with all of that said, the simple fact of the matter is that there are huge problems that have been documented in psychedelic clinical trials. Many of those problems remain unaddressed, even as clinical trials are ongoing. It would be wonderful to see researchers focus on correcting those issues and ensuring the science is as robust and rigorous as possible.

To my second point, psychedelic surveillance capitalism is a monster of a topic, but I'll try to summarize it here. Right now, if your therapist asked if they could video and audio record all of their sessions, store them on "the cloud," and subject them to AI/algorithmic review, I suspect most people would balk at this request. But these types of technological approaches are baked in to the psychedelic-assisted therapy industry. I suspect part of the reason the industry is able to get away with this is that it's presented as "cutting edge," "groundbreaking," or a "revolutionary new paradigm in mental health," the likes of which have never been seen before. Despite the fact that psychedelic-assisted therapy has yet to be approved by the FDA (and if/when it is, it will be based on tiny sample sizes with little to no study of the use of these technological "enhancements"), there are already psychedelic clinics and companies pushing "digital therapeutics," "digital phenotypes," the use of wearables and smartphone apps, AI-enhanced recording devices to analyze therapy sessions and behaviors, or—in two words—totalizing surveillance.

Mindstrong Health, a partner of psilocybin start-up COMPASS Pathways (and incidentally, a company I sounded the alarm on back in 2018) has been billed as "the smartphone app that can tell you're depressed before you know it yourself." How does it do this? By analyzing everything you do on your smartphone. It's worth pointing out that most of the things you do with your smartphone aren't HIPAA protected (including web searches about medical issues you may be experiencing). So here you have a company obtaining access to troves of granular personal data and authorized to use that data to build a sketch of your well-being. In a world where everything about that data collection goes "right," we could imagine all sorts of concerning implications if that data were to be hacked by malicious actors or made accessible to advertising firms. In a world where that data collection goes "wrong," we could imagine Kafka-esque bureaucracies of dystopian diagnoses and nightmarish visions of trying to prove your "sanity" to the AI in your smartphone. And that's without getting into questions of behavioral modification, like those we've seen from Facebook, Instagram, and other social media firms.

If we examine some of the apps that corporadelic firms such as Field Trip Health have already rolled out for use alongside their ketamine clinics, we can see additional surveillance-related issues. The Field Trip app invites users to record their psychedelic experiences in a digital "journal." Nearly all psychedelic

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compounds are still federally criminalized in all contexts, and despite some state decriminalization momentum, most are also illegal at the state level. What happens to people who've been storing records of their illicit substance use on a smartphone app if the company that owns the app decides to share those records with law enforcement?

I've sketched out visions of psychedelic surveillance capitalism in various talks and interviews because I think this is one of the most important (and least discussed) issues in the field of medicalized psychedelics. The bioethical and social implications of these surveillance projects are massive, and, with the initial medical psychedelics bubble starting to pop (retreat centers going bankrupt, ketamine clinics shutting down, investment dollars drying up, etc.), there's a very real question no one seems to be asking: how might venture capital investors get a return on their investment in a field that may not see widespread FDA approval for years, if ever? I would suggest that the monetization of granular biomedical data that isn't subject to medical privacy laws offers a literal treasure trove for those unscrupulous individuals who are willing to leverage it.

BP and ND: *How would you have liked to have seen psychedelics integrated into society—if at all—outside of a medicalization model?*

DN: This is an enormous question, but I think there's actually a really simple way to answer it, for me. To the extent that psychedelics can be integrated into society, irrespective of medical or other applications, I'd like to see it done without engaging in commodification. I would suggest that doing so would require a radical transformation of our social relationships across all fronts (political, economic, etc.). When I've presented variations of this idea in different psychedelic spaces, I've gotten a fair bit of pushback, likely due to the scale and scope of such an undertaking.

That said, I'm not proposing this as a singular monolithic project, but rather an idea that if people are invested in noncommodified approaches to psychedelia, then they should engage in the noncommodified approaches that make the most sense to them, and within that organic patchwork of approaches, people would ostensibly find others with whom they share affinity, desires, and approaches, and the projects and paths that come out of those relationships would offer situationally relevant ways to integrate psychedelics into society in noncommodified ways.

If it sounds like I'm being vague, then good, you're paying attention. The vagueness here is not because I don't have my own thoughts about approaches, but rather, because it's not for me (or any singular person or other entity) to dictate what this could/should look like in its totality. The systems and approaches that

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make sense for different people in different contexts will depend on the needs and wants of the people and contexts at hand.

I think it's worth clarifying that the reason my main focus is on non-commodified psychedelia is that, from my perspective, commodification is at the heart of most of the harms that surround psychedelic spaces and subcultures. Whether it's the dynamics that surround abusive practitioners who exploit their clients in order to meet their own financial (or emotional or sexual) needs, or the investment vehicles incentivizing corporadelic firms to speed ahead without robust clinical and ethical frameworks (or data), or the countless people involved in psychedelic medicalization who see the problems but remain silent because their ability to continue to work in the field (and secure food, clothes, and shelter as a result of that work) depends on it, real harm has occurred and continues to unfold as a result of the dynamics of commodification within psychedelia. And while I don't think removing this dynamic (and any accompanying social restructuring) would result in some utopian society, I do think we'd be better off for it. And at the very least, it's how I'd like to see psychedelics integrated into society.

BP and ND: *Can you speak to those who hear your critique and ask for some note of hope?*

DN: To bastardize a bit of Kafka, "There is hope … but not for us." I hope that's not too dark (Ha! See? A glimmer of hope!). In all seriousness though, I do see some rays of hope, but it's still quite dark. For instance, since we produced the *Cover Story: Power Trip* podcast, I've seen more people willing to come forward and publicly talk about their experiences with harmful practitioners and research institutions. While I don't think that's enough to curb institutional bad actors and cult-like organizations that will likely continue to do what they want as long as they have the power to do so, I think it's a step toward improving some of the ongoing problems within the field and maybe keeping people a bit safer.

Maybe it's a cop-out, but I think the best way I can reply to this request for hope is with an excerpt from a CrimethInc. essay, "We Fight Because We Like It: Maintaining Our Morale against Seemingly Insurmountable Odds" [CrimethInc. Ex-Workers Collective, *It's Going Down*, March 22, 2018, https://itsgoingdown.org/we-fight-because-we-like-it-maintaining-our-morale-against-seemingly-insurmountable-odds/].

> I don't participate in anarchist struggle because I think we will save the world. On the contrary, I fight because I know that one day the whole world will be destroyed—the earth will be consumed by the sun, leaving only ash—and when that day comes, I want the story that ends to be a story of beauty and tragedy and resistance to tyranny. I want

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> the story we live to be a story of joy and courage and togetherness. I fight because it is a way of remembering those who came before us, because it is a way of honoring the creativity and rebelliousness of my contemporaries, because it is an act of care for everyone else whose heart breaks to see injustice and misfortune. I fight because I know that there is no happily ever after, there is no salvation waiting for us at the end of history; there is just what we do together today. That is all the beauty and meaning in the world that there will ever be, and it can be more than enough.

I don't know that psychedelia will be able to avoid the pitfalls and problems it's created for itself. I don't know that anyone will be able to derail the hype machine that threatens the safety and well-being of countless people who are flocking to psychedelics as miracle cures and panaceas. But I do know that one day I will die, and perhaps my life will flash before my eyes. And when I look back on the things I saw and what I tried to do about them, I'd like to know that I did what I could, when I could. That I showed up for people who were harmed and who were told that they had to keep quiet, lest they derail the movement for psychedelic healing; a movement that was too often positioned as more important than their well-being and humanity.

If there's hope to be had with regard to psychedelia, it's in the here and now. It's in finding the other others and struggling together against the impulses of dominant culture that are increasingly saturating psychedelic subcultures. It's in breaking away from psychedelics for capitalist self-optimization and individualized medical "cures" for systemic harms. Perhaps, in one sense, the greatest hope with regard to psychedelic medicalization is that we don't need the FDA to approve psilocybin for depression or MDMA for PTSD. In order to dramatically improve the material conditions and psychological well-being of life on planet Earth, we need only to put an end to the ecocide of industrial civilization, the pathological hoarding of billionaires, and the class warfare waged by politicians. How hard could that really be?

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