

Timothy leary's: "turning on the world" and its movement essay

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Timothy Leary's: "Turning on the World" and its Movement Abstract: This paper deals with the article "Turning on the World" by Timothy Leary. It seeks to analyze the movement that such ideas spawned, and uses two specialized academic articles to analyze the cultural content of Leary's movement, in other words, the expression of Leary's ideas in the wider world of revolution and rebellion. This paper finds that the basic idea, the uniqueness of the movement that Leary spawned can be found in the internal orientation of the revolution, the idea that this revolution, unlike all others, would be about the liberation of the psyche from the bonds of materialism and competition: this revolution was to start from within. Timothy Leary's early work on rebellion, psychiatry and drug use set the stage for a revolutionary movement that was like no other in history. While all other revolutions had a specific goal, articulated in political and economic terms, and sought a disciplined force to bring this about, this revolution was to be the opposite.

Rather than expressing liberation in economic and political terms, the movement that Leary founded saw its satisfaction in an internal liberation: the liberation of the id from the superego. This is based on the idea that social pathology, as well as individual neurosis, can be traced to the repression of the id in the name of such things as progress, material gain and technological innovation and efficiency. This paper, taking Leary as its starting point, seeks to understand the nature of this set of ideas as deriving from the 1959 essay "Turning on the World."

"Leary's brief (1959) essay, "Turning on the World," is itself a highly symbolic "trip" into what Leary and Sandoz pharmaceuticals called "<https://assignbuster.com/timothy-learys-turning-on-the-world-and-its-movement-essay/>

enlightenment." The essay is saturated with gnostic symbols that are designed to draw the reader into Leary's world. It is an essay that is aimed at the "unenlightened," so as to bring them to a chemically-induced "higher consciousness." This consciousness was to solve the problems that contemporary metaphysics and psychiatry had not solved, to bring "humanity" to a full knowledge of itself through the ingestion of certain chemicals, chemicals that would reveal and unfold the world and the human mind in all its dimensions. There can be no question that this essay admits that the LSD movement was elite led: it was a small cell of Harvard professors, pharmaceutical firms and doctors throughout the country that had experimented with the drug and reached what they called "enlightenment." (Leary, 1959 331).

Leary also makes no bones about the fact that Sandoz, the pharmaceutical giant, was behind it and (in part), financed these experiments, and later on, according to Flashbacks (cf. esp ch 11) these experiments were carried out on prisoners. Leary holds, at least at the early date of this essay, that the philosophical and religious problems of the world could be solved with LSD. Early on, Leary holds that the problem of the "platonic gnosis" has been solved, that tripping can lead one to the world of the forms, and hence, to authentic humanity (Leary, 1959, 332).

The fact that some of his elite friends start their trips in "the cave" is a symbol going back to Plato's Republic, where the cave was the realm of ignorance, of shadow play, of the "world," while the world of the forms was the realm of truth and enlightenment (Leary, 1959, 335). For him, at least on

paper, this was not a form of mind control, but of liberation: liberation from the shackles of matter and into the realm of spirit, hidden in matter but only perceptible under certain, chemically induced, conditions. But on a more prosaic level, Leary believes that this drug can create a "new mental health," in that older mental problems now have a new approach in treatment, and that the final connection between magic and science has been found (Leary, 1959, 335ff). For Leary and his friends, tripping was the route to world peace and what is oddly called the "cosmic revolution," where even outer space can be conquered and revolutionized (Leary, 1983). But inner space in Leary's immediate concern. With the help of this drug, diseases like depression and schizophrenia can be treated and cured by the opening up of this new world, "turning on" the world of matter into a world of form, spirit and truth. Hence, "turning on the world" is to alter it, to reveal its properties when the senses are heightened by LSD.

Otherwise, the world exists in three paltry dimensions, the cause-and-effect universe of power and politics. The basic idea here is that the true revolution, as well as the true revelation, is internal, not external, it is the awakening of the "god within" that leads to the true revolution, or even becomes itself the true revolution. Philosophy, and metaphysics more specifically, has been put on a new level since the world of absolute reality has been disclosed through chemical treatment. At the same time, since absolute reality has been found, so has "god," and hence, the religious problem has been solved. One begins in the "cave" of unknowing, and one, through the alkaloids, eventually comes to the true gnosis, the true knowledge of the universe that previous philosophers and theologians had

only barely glimpsed. In general, it seems that the (1959) essay of Leary's was a means of internalizing revolution: to take it off the streets and make it a personal, quasi-religious quest. It is not so much to say that Leary did not believe the ideas found in the essay, but that he was double minded, speaking in terms of a " rebel" while at the same time being little more than a company man. It is a sign of the end of western philosophy: the failure, from a purely secular point of view, to solve the basic problems of war and peace, of free will, of absolute reality, of metaphysics or ontology.

It was an admission of failure, that the Enlightenment of the 16th century did not solve problems, it only covered up old ones and made new ones. The scientific revolution only made new problems for the old, and prided itself on solving some of the problems that modernity itself created. Hence, if this is all a failure, then chemicals is the last hope: the final gnosis, the connection between science and magic (cf. Leary, 335) can be found through chemical treatment administered by trained psychologists. This view is precisely that taken by Foss (1976).

Taking the vision of Leary as a starting point, Foss constructs the late 1960s radicals as taking the internal revolution of Leary and taking it to the streets. The basic structure looks like this: first, the Leary movement went beyond typical revolutionary and rebellious forms of behavior. They developed an entirely new method of rebellion. Second, social reality was radically reinterpreted, as Leary explicitly claims the new revolution should be based on. Reality is unfolded and recreated by drugs, and this precisely is how Foss sees the late 1960s movement Leary spawned. Third, and this is the most

significant for this paper, the concept of " mass therapy" becomes central. In other words, things like the commune, concerts and mass political action become a form of " curing" the diseases of 1950s conformity and materialism. It is indeed a connection between theology, magic and science (Foss, 1976, 46-47).

At the same time, Foss, typifies the " new" nature of this rebellion by providing four specific categories of rebellion that, while not explicitly taken from Leary, could easily have been. First, the concept of subjectivity: Leary makes the point above that the revolution needs to be internal before it can ever hope to be external. This might be the first example of a revolutionary movement that explicitly stressed the subjective nature of the participant, rather than external ideological, mass-movements. Second, the fact that this subjective awareness and centrality provides the movement with no real discipline.

This was not a Marxist movement, with a strong central vanguard leadership. This was meant to be a metaphysical and psychological movement as well as a political one. But it should be clear that the former was to take precedence over the latter. Foss holds this as historically unique. At the same time, Foss holds that this revolution was to provide the participant with a sense of joy and friendship. It is not so much the product of the revolution as the movement itself, the subjective state of the person participating in the creating the embryo of a new society. Finally, Foss holds that the movements that sprung from Leary's ideas is the most specifically Learian of all: like Marcuse, psychic disturbance derives from the frustration of impulse.

Hence, the concept of liberation is the liberation of impulse, the liberation of the id from the superego, hence, creating the "cure" for materialism and utilitarianism (Foss, 1976, 50). Another interesting approach is provided by Spates (1976) in his more formal analysis of the "ideological content" of the "underground" press in the late 1960s and ending in 1975. This analysis attempts to be more scientific in its approach to the underground press, a press whose content can easily be traced both to Leary and Marcuse (esp, 1964). Like Foss, Spates holds that the media created by the new revolutionary movement was concerned, not with overt political goals, or anything resembling utilitarianism, but with concepts of self expression (Spates, 1976, 869). At the same time, the dominant press, the major dailies and news magazines, focused most of their attention on the opposite: labor, goal orientation and politics as furthering more general ends.

For Spates, the concept here is that there is no goal in the underground press past the activity. In other words, the rejection of 1950s materialism took the form of activity for its own sake, expression as a mode of being as well as expressing a state of being (Spates, 1976, 871). For both Spates and Foss, the world that expressed the idea of Leary and other founders of the "hippie" movement was more concerned with artistic creativity and joy than goal oriented behavior.

Utilitarianism was the great enemy: pleasure was not found in politics or economics, but in creativity. What makes Spates' contribution interesting is that he holds, in his detailed analysis of the underground press, that as the seventies wore on, the "being as expression" idea begins to fade. More

concrete political and social goals begin to develop as the American military draft was ended and the American involvement in the Vietnam war wore down and stopped altogether (Spates, 1976, 877). The conclusion might be here that the war itself was responsible for this rebellion against the utilitarian, Protestant order in the US and Great Britain. The war was the ultimate expression of the older, materialistic and labor/goal-centeredness of the dominant culture. But when the war wore down (or at least American involvement in it), such a rebellion against the old order was not seen to be as important, and hence began to die (Spates, 1976, 877).

By way of conclusion, this paper has sought two things: an understanding of Leary's essay, and the reaction to this essay (and the ideas contained therein) on a more social and cultural level. Both Foss and Spates hold that this externalization was to be found in the joy of subjective states and the creativity in expressing those states: in other words, joy in the act of creation, not in the typical and taken for granted "goal orientation" that Spates takes as the center of the dominant culture and its journalistic expression. For Leary, Foss and Spates alike, mankind under the yoke of materialism and hard work, was a sick creature: suppressing the id for the sake of a constantly delayed gratification, a gratification that was endlessly delayed. This constant repression of the pleasure principle led to such things as the Vietnam war, Watergate (later) and the corruption of a society where the pursuit of money and reputation was at the center. Their revolution started from within: from self-liberation to social liberation.

Therefore, for the first time, psychology, laid out by Leary, became the primary weapon in the revolutionist's arsenal. References: Leary, Timothy. "Turning on the World." in *The Portable 60s Reader*. Anne Charter, ed. Penguin, 2003.

pps 331-342 Marcuse, Herbert. *One Dimensional Man*. Beacon, 1964.

One of the basic theses of this work is that the frustration of desire and impulse is the cause of many social ills and specifically, social psychosis.

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64 Spates, James L. "The Counterculture and Dominant Culture Values: A Cross National Analysis of the Underground Press and Dominant Culture Magazines." *American Sociological Review* 41 (1976) 868-883.