

Editor's Introduction

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Over the last several decades there has been a growing wave of concern over the use and abuse of mind-altering substances that has left in its wake increasingly large expenditures for what is familiarly called the "War on Drugs," despite the simultaneously ever-expanding body of evidence attesting to that war's failure. Politicians running for public office routinely promise to solve these problems, but this only seems to mean filling our already over-crowded prisons beyond capacity with more people, many of whom may have done little more than use an illegal substance. The costs—both human and economic—to our society continue to skyrocket.

Because we believe that the issues underlying the use, abuse, and control of mind-altering substances cry out for a more rational and invigorated discussion, we made the decision to hold the eighth *Social Research* conference on *Altered States of Consciousness*. The proceedings of that conference appear in this issue.

The conference attempted to set the current debate in the context of its extended history as a way of uncovering the markedly different attitudes that have existed at different times and in different places, and as a way of raising questions about the validity of our current attitudes. Beyond basic exploration of the question, "What *is* an altered state of consciousness?" the conference examined the historical uses of mind-altering activities in religion, in medicine, for recreation, and for inspiration. It considered the uses of both psychoactive substances and various behaviors as ways of altering consciousness and explored the legal history of the control of mind-altering substances. It concluded with a discussion about possible ways of reducing the harm that may be caused by mind-altering substances.

One of the questions that was addressed at the conference seems central to a more nuanced understanding of the tangled issues raised by mind-altering drug use, namely: What distin-

guishes mind-altering activities that are valued (for example, as parts of religious rituals) from those that are deemed dangerous and consequently condemned and outlawed? In asking and attempting to answer this question, we hoped it would become clear that in many cases the neurophysiological effects of mind-altering substances are virtually identical to the effects produced by various behavioral practices or placebos. An understanding of this point inevitably raises doubts about the reflexive distinctions this society makes between one kind of inducing agent and another, and could begin to foster new ways of thinking.

Arien Mack

Social Research Conference Series

Taking their inspiration from the belief that to forget history is to risk repeating it, these conferences aim to enhance public understanding of critical and contested issues by exploring those issues in their broad historical and cultural contexts. Arien Mack, editor.

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