Postdoctoral Research Project – Abstract


In 1970, London-based Oz-Magazine published the article “The Chemical Revolution. To Trip Is Human, to Revolt Divine!” The article contains several passages of a speech given by Victor Jasha, the director of the Sociological Institute at Adelphi University, at the Psychedelic Convention in New York two years before. Conceiving LSD as a “psycho-chemical technology” that would enable human beings to transcend their “spatial, one-dimensional conscience”, Jasha depicted the social conditions he identified as the driving forces behind the emerging “international movement” of Psychedelics: the materialism and the resulting “spiritual vacuum” in Western, bourgeois societies.\(^1\) Additionally, he also diagnosed the transcendence of the individual and, by extension, of society as a whole as effects of LSD. For instance, in Java’s narrative wars were constructed as a phenomenon of a Pre-LSD-society, irreconcilable with the rise of a “planetary culture” that would supposedly transcend national boundaries and that he predicted to arise with the widespread consumption of LSD.\(^2\)

Assuming a transnational and transcultural perspective, my project focuses on the body politics of ecstasy practiced by Western countercultures. Like in Jasha’s article, these were often heralded as the driving forces of the social and cultural transformations to come.\(^3\) In this context, I will look at the interwovenness of countercultures in the USA, Canada, England, France, Italy, and the Federal Republic of Germany. In these countries, countercultural activities were an important historical phenomenon that exerted a significant social and cultural efficacy. Members of these countercultures were in a close dialogue with each other, for instance via journeys.\(^4\) Ex negativo the transnational character was expressed in the following statement of an Italian citizen: “Intensify the border control and don’t let the longhair into the country.”\(^5\) However, even though the countercultures of these countries were embedded in a close network of contact

\(^1\) Drawing on Stuart Hall and Edward Said I understand the concept of ‘the West’ as a historical construct which is closely intertwined with global power relations.
and exchange, important differences can be identified between them. For instance, the existence of a potent Old Left in Italy and France influenced the process of formation of the countercultures in these countries.

In addition to the consumption of conscience-changing substances, the project also turns its perspective towards the “sexual revolution” propagated in countercultural contexts. Pioneers as well as members of countercultures interlinked the “psychedelic revolution” with the “liberation of sexuality.” Consequently, they understood the “sexual revolution” as another sphere of alternative body politics that would make possible the “development of new behavior patterns and new character structures” and, in consequence, the overcoming of ossified social conditions.6

During the late 19th as well as early 20th centuries, intellectuals and bohemians in Western countries had already understood sexual-orgastic as well as drug-induced experiences of ecstasy as practices of (individual) transcendence.7 Since the 1960s, the dissemination and efficacy of this conception expanded enormously. However, the rise of these ecstatic body politics also caused vehement resistance. For instance, parts of the political left perceived the consumption of drugs to be a counterrevolutionary practice, whereas feminists attacked the sexism and male dominance inherent to the politics of sexual liberation.8 As a result, modifications of the discourses on the liberation of sexuality and the consumption of drugs as well as changes of the practices took place throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. First, the notion of the ‘sexual revolution’ as a means of a radical societal transformation significantly lost relevance and a feminist critique of sexism and male chauvinism connected to the ‘sexual revolution’ got a more and more powerful voice. Second, since the early 1970s the strong and explicit politicization of psychedelic drug use lost influence. Consequently, the practices of drug consumption changed. Events like the smoke-in, which took place in July 1969 in Berlin and which was organized by the “Zentralrat der Haschrebellen”, were a phenomenon of the late 1960s and early 1970s. To date, some historiographical research has been done on countercultural politics of ‘psychedelic revolution’ and the ‘sexual revolution’ in the United States.9 With regard to the

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politics of ecstasy in Canada, Great Britain, France, Italy and Western Germany there only very few studies exist. Especially about the ‘psychedelic revolution’ in these countries very little is known so far. Against this backdrop, three research desiderata can be identified. First, despite the markedly transnational character of Western countercultures, an in-depth examination of their transnational interwovenness does not exist to date. Second, previous studies have focused mostly on the 1960s and early 1970s. As a consequence, the discursive transformations and disruptions that took place during the late 1970s and early 1980s very often remain untold. Furthermore, the historiography on countercultures displays a third – and quite astounding – lacuna. Although contemporary notions of the human body were fundamental for the politics of ecstasy – in a certain way, members of countercultures conceived bodies as territories of political conflict and power struggle –, very little research has been done on countercultural practices from a body-historical perspective.

**Counterculture and Transnationality**

During the 1960s, countercultures arose in different Western countries. Advocating hedonistic practices of daily life, they differed fundamentally from other factions of the New Left more oriented to conventional political concepts and strategies. They tried to initiate a cultural revolution and create alternative spaces beyond the influence of capitalist socitation. They countered what they understood as the human alienation in capitalist consumer societies with a politics of the self that was supposed to establish solidarity among communities oriented towards sustainability, ‘naturalness’ and holism. Analogous to the more ‘conventional-political’ factions of the New Left, these countercultures were transnational in multiple ways: in their analyses of society (“Frontières = Repression”), in their self-conceptions, and in their practices of daily life. Interpreting the social conditions of Western societies as “interrelated and interlocked by a web, a network of shared social,

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economic and political practices,“¹⁵ these countercultures were themselves integrated into a
more closely intertwined transnational web within which knowledge and experiences circulated.
Via the extensive networks of the alternative press, the (scientific) exchange on conferences and
gatherings, contacts in daily life or in the context of the long journeys that led great numbers of
alternatives to the East (especially India) by traveling the Hippie Trail, members of
countercultures shared experiences, learned from each other and interacted in shaping and
framing their worldviews, their visions of life, their practices, and their constructions of identity.
With regard to this phenomenon, contemporaries were talking of the “International of
dropouts”.¹⁶
In this global process, U.S. counterculture functioned as a primary driving force. Rooted in the
urban communities of the Beatniks and Bohemians, U.S. counterculture spread slowly during
the first half of the 1960s and expanded rapidly since 1967.¹⁷ In the following years, strongly
influenced by the experiences made by alternatives in the U.S., countercultures emerged in other
Western countries. Until the early 1980s, these alternative cultures exerted a significant
efficacy.¹⁸

Sources
In alternative newspapers and journals, comics, scientific and bellettistic monographs, travel
reports, diaries and memoires, the alternative project of creating a new human subject
materialized in a myriad of texts. Advocates of the ‘psychedelic revolution’ and the ‘sexual
revolution’ like Timothy Leary, Abe Hoffman, Ronald Steckel, Herbert Marcuse, or Günter
Amendt as well as their antagonists published a myriad of (scientific) books that approach
countercultural body politics from different perspectives. Additionally, numerous monographs
dealing with experiences connected to drug use were published during the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁹
Important and influential journals like the British International Times and Oz Magazine, the US-
American Liberation News Service, the German Agit 883 and Konkret, or the French Actuel as
well as pamphlets and documents of countercultural groups like the ‘Zentralrat der
Haschrebellen’ or ‘The Diggers’ are available online. In addition to these digitized materials I
will also draw on a wide range of archival materials in my project. The archives “APO und
soziale Bewegungen” and “Archiv für Alternativkulturen”, both of which are located in Berlin,
as well as the archive „Protest, Widerstand und Utopie in der BRD” in Hamburg provide a huge

¹⁶ Kosel, Gammler, p. 85.
¹⁷ Farrell, Spirit of the Sixties, p. 203.
¹⁹ Cf. Rudi Wormser, Drogen, Erfahrung und Erkenntnis. Selbstzeugnisse, Dokumente, Analysen. München:
number of sources dealing with the German counterculture. Collections based in U.S.-archives like the “Underground Press and Alternative Newspaper Collection” (Special Collections at Michigan State University), “The Ludlow-Santo Domingo Library” (Houghton Library at Harvard University) or the “Liberation News Service Records” (Special Collections Research Center at Temple University) do not only entail a vast amount of sources documenting the body politics of the U.S.-counterculture, but also of its Canadian, British, French, and German counterparts.

State documents such as court papers and police records which are stored in archives like the Landesarchiv Berlin constitute another important kind of source material for my project. Taking into account these manifold types of sources enables me to look at countercultural politics of ecstasy on two interrelated levels. Firstly, by examining (newspaper) articles, monographs, and court papers, I will reconstruct contemporary discourses on alternative, ecstatic body politics. Secondly, I will focus on the actual body practices that alternatives engaged in by looking at ego-documents like travel reports or diaries.

**Theoretical and methodical Approaches**

*Politics of Ecstasy* situates itself in the fields of transnational history, social history, and cultural history, with body-historical approaches being of particular importance for my research. Rather than understanding bodies as biologically determined and historically fixed entities existing independently from social conditions, I conceptualize them as the products of discourses and practices. Therefore, I conceive both bodies and notions of bodies as deeply related to social relations of power. Consequently, by referring to intersectional approaches, I assume that multiple and sometimes contradictory notions and configurations of human bodies exist simultaneously, which are, in turn, interwoven with social categories like class, race, sex, age, etc.

Applying this theoretical conceptualization, I understand countercultural body practices as a significant part of social power struggles. Therefore, the countercultural politics of ecstasy, aiming at the reconfiguration of human bodies, has to be understood as an attempt to overcome the social conditions of late capitalism, which were often perceived as violent and ossified.

To examine alternative body politics and their embeddedness in networks that transcended national borders, it is essential to draw on transnational and transcultural approaches. Applying


such a methodical set of tools makes it possible to examine the development of transnational Western countercultures without losing sight of the specific adaption of the body politics to different national contexts. Furthermore, it is possible to analyze the enormous perception, appropriation and transformation of Eastern, and especially Indian philosophies by Western countercultures.

To get into view the manifold transnational and transcultural contacts that significantly configurated countercultural body politics, I will focus on certain contact zones which were important for Western countercultures. In places and spaces like music festivals, journals and conferences, India and the Hippie Trail, the transnational and transcultural contacts condensed. To illuminate these contact zones, I will draw on the method of historical discourse analysis to reconstruct the knowledge underlying the countercultural body politics of ecstasy. However, the examination does not remain on the discursive level. Rather, it also draws on theoretical conceptions of social practice. Such a methodical set of tools does not only enable me to look at discourses on countercultural and ecstatic body politics. Instead it also sheds light on the concrete patterns of practice as well as on the interactions between discourses and practices.

**Working plan for the one year in Tel Aviv**

My project fits perfectly into the frame of the post-doctoral seminar “Contextualizing the Self: Creating and Recreating the First Person”. Both in the context of my Ph.D.-thesis, which deals with masculinity and modern antisemitism in the US-South from the 1860s until the 1920s, and of my post-doctoral project I have worked with different theoretical approaches to processes of subjectivization. Drawing on this knowledge and experiences I want to contribute to a vivid and fruitful culture of exchange and discussion in the seminar.

In regard to my postdoctoral project, I will primarily analyze sources either available in digitized form on the internet or already in my possession. In March 2017, I will visit the Archives and Special Collections at Indiana University Bloomington to look through collections relevant for my project (for instance the “Kinsey Institute Library and Special Collections”; the “Wakefield Mss.” in the Lilly Library Manuscript Collections). Furthermore, in summer 2017 I will visit the “APO und soziale Bewegungen-Archiv” and the “Archiv für Alternativkultur” in Berlin. In addition, I am already in possession of a great number of contemporary monographs and pamphlets on the ‘sexual revolution’ as well as many issues of the magazine *Konkret*, which was and continues to be one of the leading journals of the German radical left.

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The results of this analysis of my sources will provide me with material for at least two articles. The first one will deal with gender and the ‘psychedelic revolution’ in Western Germany and Great Britain. As I will show in this article, the notions and practices of the ‘psychedelic revolution’ were highly gendered and sexualized, due to the close connections contemporaries established between the ‘psychedelic revolution’ and the ‘sexual revolution’. The second article will focus on transnational contacts and exchanges between members of countercultures in the United States and Western Germany with regard to the politics of ecstasy. Journals in which I would like to publish these articles are Geschichte und Gesellschaft, the Journal of the History of Sexuality or the Journal of American History.

Besides the research I will do on my postdoctoral project, I would like to organize a workshop or a small conference on the transnational and transcultural dimensions of Western countercultures in cooperation with, at least, one faculty member of the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies. And last but not least, it would be a great pleasure for me to present some of the results of my Ph.D. thesis in one or two public lectures. Discourses on masculinity in connection with racialized sexualities in the famous Leo Frank Case would make for an excellent topic of one of these lectures.