Over the past decade and a half, scholars such as Erika Dyck, Ido Hartogsohn, and Lucas Richert have demonstrated that psychedelic drugs like LSD have a rich history that has influenced psychotherapy, law, and popular culture. Chris Elcock’s *Psychedelic New York: A History of LSD in the City* is an admirable contribution to this body of literature. Much of the well-known narrative about the history of LSD focuses on the West Coast, notably Berkeley and San Francisco. Using a diverse source base, including a wide variety of archival documents and oral histories, Elcock’s book demonstrates that New York was an important site of psychedelic use in the twentieth century.

Elcock’s book is composed of eight chapters. The first chronicles the history of drug use in New York before the LSD era. Here, we learn about peyote use amongst Beat writers in Greenwich Village and how Benzedrine and heroin influenced jazz. One notable aspect of this chapter is the inclusion of the queer female poet Diane di Prima amongst the traditionally male pantheon of drug-using Beats such as Allen Ginsberg and William S. Borroughs. The second chapter discusses Timothy Leary’s escapades in New York with psilocybin, the active chemical in magic mushrooms, which included dosing with the ultra-rich and Beats like Jack Kerouac (who hated it). The third chapter recounts the history of scientific research on psychedelic drugs in New York. This chapter is important because it highlights instances where LSD research continued into the 1970s, well beyond the point after which most psychedelic research had ended due to legal restrictions. The fourth chapter addresses the development of psychedelic culture in the East Village. It describes the acid experiences of New York teens, and it talks about the city’s first head shops and the conflict between the counterculture and the long-standing working-class inhabitants of the Lower East Side. The fifth chapter focuses on Nina Graboi, a member of New York’s upper crust who became a psychedelic advocate later in life and helped manage Leary’s League of Spiritual Discovery. The sixth chapter details the rise of psychedelic art through focusing
on the psychedelic artist Isaac Abrams. The seventh describes how the rise of heroin and cocaine, the war on drugs, and the changing economic fortunes of New York led to the downfall of the psychedelic counterculture. The eighth chapter discusses how psychedelic use continued in New York into the 1970s after the death of psychedelic idealism. The concluding chapter provides a coda, which briefly discusses psychedelic use up to the present.

Elcock's work shines through its balanced approach to the history of psychedelics and how it situates LSD in the broader context of New York's drug scene. I particularly enjoyed Elcock's references to lesser-known psychedelics like DET (diethyltryptamine) and ibogaine. Elcock also shows how psychedelic use overlapped with or sometimes replaced the use of other drugs like alcohol, heroin, and amphetamines among a wide variety of different groups of New Yorkers. This positioning of psychedelics as one drug among many avoids what the psychologist and drug policy reform advocate Carl Hart has termed psychedelic exceptionalism—singling out psychedelics as unique and different from other drugs.[2] Elcock also does not shy away from discussing the full range of experiences that people had from LSD. His discussion of both bad trips and enlightening ones avoids the bias (both positive and negative) which sometimes appears in histories of drugs.

The wide variety of historical actors Elcock discusses are another strength of the book. Elcock apologizes for the prominent role that Timothy Leary plays in the narrative. However, his balanced treatment of Leary and his use of Leary's perambulations around New York as a device to connect the various groups he discusses is well done. These include queer and female voices, which have sometimes been left out or downplayed in previous histories of LSD. Elcock also shows that much of New York's psychedelic culture was driven by the ultra-rich, who were often older than the fresh-faced middle-class dropouts typically associated with the psychedelic counterculture.

Academic readers may want to see more in-depth theoretical class, race, and gendered analysis than Elcock provides when discussing how various groups of New Yorkers used psychedelics. However, one assumes this omission is likely due to a desire to make this readable book accessible to a broad audience. Also, Elcock's claim that "psychedelia did little to reach out to working-class and ethnic New Yorkers" seems to be the result of a lack of available sources chronicling psychedelic use among such groups (p. 200). One wonders, particularly about PCP. Elcock quotes a New York graffiti artist claiming that PCP was "the poor man's psychedelic" of the 1970s, but does not follow up on this remark (p. 185). The music of New York artists with working-class roots like The Notorious B.I.G. and Nas, who rapped about smoking blunts in the 1990s, also suggests that cannabis was an important force in working-class black culture in the twentieth century.

However, these criticisms are small quibbles with what is an important, readable contribution to the history of psychedelics. Both academics and lay readers interested in psychedelics can learn much from this excellent book.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59497

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.