

This Way to the Abyss!

Hippies, Drugs and Promiscuity, by

Suzanne Labin, *New Rochelle, N. Y.:*

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THERE IS NOTHING NEW in the phenomenon itself, but Mme. Labin gives us a deeper, broader, wholly unromanticized view of the things Professor Reich was talking about in his *Greening of America*. But Reich was limited pretty much to the manicured lawns and Gothico-Georgian halls of Ivy League America. Mme. Labin, a seasoned French journalist and restless traveler, has followed the hashish trail around the world, and is as familiar with the drug-reeking huts of Katmandu as with the drowsy and sometimes howling hallways of yesterday's Haight Ashbury. She reports the Manson murder cult, the chapels of Satanism in California, the Tantric liturgy of copulation as a Hindu export to Americans.

She recalls, moreover, that people have been tripping chemically out of the actual world since at least the second millennium before Christ, when a Chinese emperor wrote in detail about the culture and uses of the hashish, or hemp, plant. She also cites the Diggers of seventeenth century England, just as Professor J. H. Plumb has remembered the Ranters of the same era, and the Brethren of the Free Spirit of fourteenth century Cologne, who rejected the world, except to steal its provisions, took off their clothes and coupled in church because they felt *eros* was close enough to *agape* to fulfill the divine command. These earlier fugitives also had their chemical shortcuts to beatitude, though being Europeans they patronized the indigenous variety, namely alcohol, in many of its forms. And drunk or sober, then as now, it was the imputed hypocrisy of the larger society, its materialism, cynicism and corruption, from which they turned, and in so turning had—as Labin, Reich and Plum (in differing de-

grees) concede—some measure of justification.

But there is a perhaps suggestive shift in the agents of release and transcendence on which the modern alienates rely. It is illustrated in one of their favorite defenses. Why, they ask, should Dad and Mom object to hash and heroin and to uppers and downers when Dad has his double scotch and Mom her cocktail every day of the year before dinner, and maybe more afterward? This argument, this implicit justification even creeps in, or is at least intimated, in some of the official reports on the contemporary drug problem, and invites an obvious rebuttal: if chemical release is the single motive, why not just rip off some of Dad's booze and Mom's premixed cocktails? It was, after all, often a custom in the older American countryside for the drinking man to take his sons at age fourteen or thereabouts to the saloon in town for a first, a rite-of-passage shot of whiskey and laugh with affection as the boys gasped and choked and lachrymated. Alcohol in its innumerable forms is part of the Western tradition, deeply rooted in the *mores* of many peoples, a sacrament here, a curse everywhere, all of whose social implications are familiar, and some of the worst still stubbornly unrestrained. Those older heretics of whom Mme. Labin writes at least shared with the straight society its familiar mind benders. Why do the modern withdrawers employ the full technology of the world they reject to import exotic drugs, all the more dangerous because experientially unknown? Is there a sign here of new extremity in their alienation?

It is not as though they have deeper ideological or philosophical or theological roots for rebellion. Unlike the older heretics they do not reject the faith of their fathers—because faith in that sense is wholly outside their cognizance. Professor Plumb says it is the total lack of God that drives them to the chemical alternatives. Labin and Plumb agree that the hippies are in any political sense simply neuters. Solipsist sensation—or de-sensation—seems to be their entire

thing. Yet far from reducing their significance in a time of troubles, this may enhance it. Mme. Labin intimates from time to time that these quietists and passivists may be turned to use by people who are very unquiet indeed. Observers can see what she means in some current events in the United States.

For the counterculture attracts at least to its fringes and certainly to its defense whole platoons of the variegated restless. If the hippies themselves are not ideologues, ideologues all along the leftward lines rise against their straight-world critics. People who do not smoke pot defend people who do. People who eschew chemical dependency find in the chemical dependents proof of the ravages worked on what they are often at pains to proclaim the brightest and best, the innocent and the demure, by the straight world and its established order. These people differ in radical ways, and in both senses of the term, from the dissentients of the loyal opposition long familiar in the established order and necessary to it. This ominous distinction was clearly drawn by a young major, just home after five and a half years in a Vietcong prison camp. Asked for his views on the anti-war movement in the United States, he replied:

I think one anti-war movement is composed of sincere high-minded, patriotic Americans . . . like Clark Clifford, Averell Harriman . . . and the majority of senators and congressmen. I identify with these men. . . . I think these men were sincerely interested in stopping the war because it was harming the United States.

Then I think there is the radical anti-war set who thrive on the war. I think it is ironic that these people whose principles the war ostensibly opposes would thrive on its prolongation. . . . I think their purpose was to hurt the United States, to radicalize our young people and to undermine our authority. . . .

Almost as the young majors were speak-

ing, anti-war voices impugned their honesty, their intellectual independence, their witness in general. Scholars brandishing special learning in the ways of the mind characterized such testimony as mere miming choreographed in the Pentagon. Allowing for broad ranges of defensible skepticism, it was still as though some in the community were still so strange to wholeness and simplicity that they found wholeness and simplicity in the establishment world merely incredible. Fringing about the counterculture, they exploit it to support a totality of rejection never threatened by the young majors and the dissenting elders with whom they "identify."

Yet "our alternating cabinets, though belonging to different parties, have never differed about the foundations," said A. J. Balfour, speaking of the political arrangements we have drawn on for our own. He continued:

It is evident that our whole political machinery presupposes a people so fundamentally at one that they can safely afford to bicker; and so sure of their own moderation that they are not dangerously disturbed by the never-ending din of political conflict. May it ever be so. . . .

Indeed, may it ever be so! Professor Plumb recalls how the Middle Ages turned on their heretics, how the "inquisitors tortured them, burned them, extirpated their women and children, rooted them out, purged society of its danger." America, he suggests, "faced by insoluble problems, made frantic by riot and by the prospect of moral defeat, may vent its spleen and crush all liberal attitudes, using as one of its excuses the nonconformity of the hippies. . . ."

Well, maybe, in the cool abstract logic of offshore academe, and then again, maybe not. Certainly, that lurid denouement cannot yet be said to be ordained. Already the very word "hippie" gives off a faint resonance of obsolescence. As suggested above, Haight Ashbury was yesterday. A

lady reviewer in the *New York Times* detects in Allen Ginsberg's latest poems the onset of middle age, always a decelerating impact. The hair and the blue denim pants and generally undifferentiated *he-she*, or *she-he*, garb are still with us, but now at the family dinner table as well as in the runaway smokerooms and acid communes. And some wearers profess Jesus in however freakish ways. Moreover, the straight world is itself more and more into the kind of self-analysis that could generate conciliation. True enough, there is a continuing sense of scary touch-and-go in the social and political ambience; but Plumb on the moderate left and Mme. Labin on the moderate right have a suggestively consensual view of the hippies. And much more than Charlie Reich's vanilla-flavored version, Mme. Labin's grim factual reporting sets the problem in perspective.

Incidentally, a word of applause for Stephanie Winston's translation of the Labin French into easy, colloquial United States English.

Reviewed by C. P. IVES