

Neşe Devenot // Neurodivergent perspectives inspired two of the biggest environmental justice movements of 2019—Extinction Rebellion and Greta Thunberg’s “Fridays for Future”—and I don’t think that’s a coincidence.

For her part, Thunberg garnered widespread media attention for linking her global impact to having Asperger’s, an autism-spectrum condition that Thunberg calls her “superpower.” According to Thunberg, her non-typical neurological makeup informs her ability to focus intensely on subjects that matter to her, and it makes her intolerant of the kinds of cognitive dissonance and compartmentalization that would be necessary to continue living as if nothing were wrong. When a culture’s status quo becomes untenable or even toxic, being “different” can open a door to new ideas and modes of action, with less concern about fitting in or accommodating “the way things are.”

While the neurodivergence behind Extinction Rebellion (XR) has received less media attention, it provides another example of how non-ordinary perspectives can inform responses to climate change. In an August 2019 conference presentation and an essay for *Emerge* magazine, XR co-founder Gail Bradbrook describes how psychedelics “helped to shape” the formation of Extinction Rebellion. She had been focusing on activist efforts involving civil disobedience since 2010, but none of her previous efforts had worked out the way she hoped. At a crossroads, she committed to a series of iboga and ayahuasca ceremonies with the intention of deepening her self-understanding as an activist, and also to gain insight into the processes involved in organizing for social change. With the assertion that “I’ve never been the same since,” Bradbrook describes a direct through line between this series of ceremonies and the founding of XR later that year.

Psychedelics have been associated with ecology since the 1960s counterculture, and psychedelic experiences of nature connectedness likely contributed to the birth of the environmental movement during that decade (Devenot). While reported feelings of “oneness” with nature were once dismissed by mainstream opinion as nonsensical fantasies, contemporary science has laid waste to the pretense that we are self-sufficient subjects isolated from our environments, while the dissolution of the subject-object boundary forms the bedrock of “the new materialism” in the humanities. Nor is the experience now seen as a mere “distraction” from real-world concerns, with recent studies in psychology positively correlating the felt sense of interconnection with pro-social and environmentalist behaviors.

But Bradbrook doesn’t believe that psychedelic experiences of nature connectedness are enough to effect meaningful change quickly and at scale. Instead, she proposes that psychedelics might have

a different role to play in light of the climate emergency, by helping climate activists to become better activists. Drawing on her own experiences, Bradbrook suggests that activists could turn to intentional psychedelic use in order to cultivate humility, which protects against petty in-fighting; to learn to trust one another; to become aware of one's complicity with the existing system, and the ways one benefits from that system; and to provide a space to feel and process all of the anger, fear, and grief involved in climate work, in order to find strength to continue the fight for systems change another day.

Bradbrook is calling for nothing less than a merger of “the heads and the fists” from the 1960s counterculture: “the cultural underground, with its visions of trees, grass, music, and love, vs. the political underground, the angry students of Marx, Marcuse and Fanon, who printed papers attacking the President and the police, [and who] glorified the urban guerrilla” (Sipapu 4). For Bradbrook, the desire to change consciousness is coextensive with the desire to change society:

“A core part of Extinction Rebellion is the courage to acknowledge and witness this loss and create space for the expression of grief. Inner balance is a key piece of this puzzle. It's something that many activists fall short on, but getting yourself in good shape so that you are able to face the realities of the situation and remain strong in the face of adversity is key to this work.... We might not know the details but we are willing to leave this broken system behind, because our courage is growing by the day, and our connections and confidence in each other is strengthening all the while.... Together, we are irresistible.”

In order to take these non-ordinary ideas seriously, academics will also need to strengthen their connections across disciplines. As a clinical research program aligned with the conventional assumptions of Western biomedicine, psychedelic science has so far exclusively focused on individualistic treatments for traumas and pathologies. As a result, it is primarily within the humanities and humanistic social sciences that scholars have begun theorizing the potential of psychedelics to facilitate systems change. As Christopher Partridge writes in *High Culture*, an Oxford University Press monograph in religious studies: “Those who use psychedelics tend to understand them as technologies that have the power to induce a transcendence of the hegemonic forces of domination” (Partridge 11). By raising cultural biases to the level of conscious awareness, psychedelics “neutralize or at least weaken hegemonic social forces and thereby open up new ways for individuals ‘to understand themselves’” (ibid). For Bradbrook, this includes new ways to understand and trust one another within a movement.

Both Bradbrook's and Thunberg's testimonies can be read as testament to a neurodiverse theory of social change, wherein “[t]he altered state [is] used as a philosophical tool for social transformation.... [I]t enables the user to view the world in a nonhabitual way...which, in turn, enables novel interpretations of the everyday” (Partridge 123). At the very least, their global impact throughout 2019 means that we should take these ideas seriously.

“Psychedelic Drugs” in *Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbook: Gender*. Vol. 7 Nature. Cengage, 2016.

Partridge, Christopher. *High Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

Sipapu, Volumes 1-5. N. Peattie, 1970. Underground press.