

3.03 The crisis of the cultural paradigm

The year 391 that marked the end of Eleusis also symbolically decreed the eclipse in Europe of every initiatory ceremony, public and official, based on the highly probable use of psychoactive substances.

Only 79 years had passed since the battle on Ponte Milvio had witnessed the triumph of the Emperor Constantine over Maxentius. It constituted the beginning of the political-religious expansion of an aggressive and sectarian cult that had caught on in Rome some years earlier. Originating in Palestine and grafted onto Hebrew Judaism, the cult was centered on the exaltation of suffering and on a human sacrifice, on the expiation, including physical atonement, of sins, some of which, regarding sexuality, were completely unknown as such to the peoples who lived in Rome and under the Empire. There were various reasons why this cult propagated, a cult which referred to *Chrestus* and for which there is no documentation with the exception of the acts of the religion itself. The cult privileged the interests of the group and its rigid organization to the detriment of the individual, it rationalized and simplified the religious vision of the world, its many gods replaced by a single god, promising paradise and eternal life to those who accepted its rules. Women, excluded from the Mithraic rites, also participated, even though in a position of submission. It was tolerant with regards to slavery, the real motor behind the economy of those times, and therefore it did not undermine the established order and even became its champion.

Christianity's long war against the pagans is marked by formal acts that began in 306 with the Council or Synod of Elvira in Spain. Between 391 and 392 Emperor Theodosius I promulgated a series of decrees forbidding visits to pagan temples and the worshiping of statues, in 399 Emperor Arcadius ordered the country temples to be torn down. Various subsequent acts, the Council of Arles (443 and 452), Tours (567), Nantes (658) and Toledo (681 and 693), reaffirmed this concept. Paradoxically, a spiritualistic visionary elite that did not disdain the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms seems to have existed parallel with and secretly within the Church itself with the probable covert support of hierarchies who accepted this mystical way.

The cult of the sacred stones in Italy and Europe (*saxorum veneratio*) also worried the founding Fathers of the new Catholic religion. Filoramo [13 12] informs us that, as results from various documents, Augustine, Caesarius of Arles and Gregorius Magnus systematically began to rehabilitate or cleanse the old peasant rites, eradicating cult practices of which we know nothing, and between the end of the fourth and the early fifth century, Maximus, bishop of Turin, strongly condemned the *simulacra lapidea*.

All this probably marked the beginning of the disappearance of the trance in Europe where it remained only in residual forms and was degraded to the rank of witchcraft or concealed, as in the pagan shamanic cult of the Benandanti, or syncretized with phenomena such as tarantism.

Regarding the various psychoactive substances, little information is available on the use of *Amanita* in Europe and they are no more than indications, while we know even less as to when it stopped being used. It seems likely however that the probable cults involved had already disappeared in pre-Roman times.

Information on the prevalence of cannabis, abundant in extra-European contexts (Near East, India, etc.), is just as scanty. In the fifth century B.C. Herodotus describes its use by the Scythians, an Indo-European tribe in the Carpathians. Finds of cannabis in a funerary urn in Wimersdorf in Germany in 1896 by the archaeologist Hermann Busse date to around the same period.

Both the Romans and the Greeks knew the plant and its effects but there is no evidence of its use for religious or recreational purposes. There are however numerous references to alcohol, the European “drug” *par excellence*, the diffusion of which in the form of wine and beer has continued up to our times.

In the Odyssey, Homer mentions *Maronean* wine, traded in by the Greeks. Evidence of wine in southern Italy (Sicily) dates back to 2000 B.C. A thousand years later it also appeared in the north in the Villanovan culture. Among the Romans it was reserved for the wealthier classes and women were excluded. It was not until the beginning of the Christian era that it became widespread and there was an increase in the wine trade to the point of inflation and a consequent fall in prices.

Beer is even older, dating to several millennia B.C. among the Sumerians, the Assyro-Babylonians and the Egyptians. It subsequently spread everywhere, including northern Europe. It is likely that the diffusion and persistence of alcohol compared to other substances is due to the fact that it was considered a food, which in antiquity already tended to “cover” its effects as a popular low-cost tranquilizer.

Islam and the Arabs introduced Europe to the still and distillation while Christianity created the great divide between the “drug culture” connected to cannabis and the “drinking” culture connected to alcohol, although other non-religious variables played a role in this distinct separation.

In 1972 a study carried out at a pan-global level on 488 homogeneous socio-cultural groups established that in 90% of these groups there was a tendency to accept manifestations of human behavior involving trance and more generally NOSCs. The remaining minority, coinciding with the advanced capitalist societies and the so-called socialist countries, were on the whole either disinterested or showed a more or less active refusal of these collective experiences.

The clear majority was and is constituted of polyphase societies where manifestations of this sort allow forms of personal and group de-conditioning. Repression of the forms of collective trance that can assume aspects of social rebellion is not a prerogative of Christianity but does and has manifested itself with significant continuity.

Lapassade writes as follows regarding the *Bacchanalia affair* in which Rome rigidly repressed this cult. Livy commented on the great number of death sentences and the destruction of the places of worship:

The trance thus appears as a natural analyzer of social contradictions. Among the Greeks, the contraposition between Dionysius and Apollo is the contradiction between the dominated and the dominator: this becomes particularly visible in Rome, with the repression of the Dionysian rites.

Particularly rigid socio-political and religious structures cannot tolerate the trance, especially when it overflows from the private sector to invest broad social strata. But where does this “need of trance” come from:

There are at least three reasons. One, because it is part of the specific nature of human beings never to be satisfied with staying where they are. Like ants or bees they incessantly work to explore their environment; and when they reach the limits of the explorable with their senses and their intellectual faculties and encounter the mystery, they do not give up, but look for ways of passing the frontier, and going to the other side.

Then, because it is from that knowledge (the result of an experience that differs greatly from the intellectual and rational experiences that characterize the operative dimension carried out in the light of day) that the experts and specialists bring back into the ordinary dimension indications and expertise, cognizance and abilities on how to deal with the dimension of the invisible and the immaterial. This also includes those objects we call “psyche” and “culture”. Lastly, because a group of human beings who together experience the passage and journey into the other world, or who put their trust in someone who can do so are transformed into a coherent, supportive, powerful “we”. It is a “we” in which many excesses, discoveries and needs find a prompt, shared, controlled way in which to express themselves.

The first of these commendable reasons has to do with processes of knowledge that go hand in hand with scientific evolution. Here too all boundaries invite us to transcend them, but here too the system tends to remain entrenched, closed in on itself and adamantly maintaining itself in the constitution of the paradigm. As Webster writes:

What connects Kuhn with psychedelics then, is that the rediscovery of psychedelics in the middle of the 20th Century promised revolutionary changes in several fields of scientific enquiry and medicine, and, as I shall claim later on, a revolution in the concept of scientific study itself. I refer to a *re-discovery* of psychedelics of course, because as we all know, the use of these substances is very ancient, pan-global, and probably goes right back to the beginning of human existence. Psychedelics had to be RE-discovered because modern industrial civilization has been one of the very few human societies generally unaware of psychedelic plants, and without any general use of them for curing, initiation, religious and heuristic practices, and so forth.

The potential revolutionary changes that this re-discovery should have brought about would have been well described and their genesis and growth well-predicted by Kuhn’s theory if it weren’t for the fact that practically all these revolutionary promises still remain unfulfilled, stifled by a long anti-psychedelic backlash. This backlash was first brought about in the late 1960s by social and governmental forces in the USA, perpetuating a long and dismal Puritanical trend in America that brought the world the great folly of modern prohibitory policies. But soon after, the scientific

establishment itself seemed to become infected with this disease-like situation, so that today it is the rare scientist who has any inkling whatever that the rediscovery of psychedelic drugs might be something not only interesting, but extremely important and potentially revolutionary. Despite the truth of the matter, so obvious to those in the know, to say that the psychedelic rediscovery was one of the most important social AND scientific developments of the 20th century would be to invite unremitting ridicule from the great majority of scientists alive today.

Such reactionary resistance to scientific revolution, although a great disappointment and in general an apparent discredit to the legitimacy of so-called scientific progress, is nevertheless the normal state of affairs, as Kuhn's findings show. When closely examined from Kuhn's perspective on the history of science, the scientific enterprise is seen to be almost overbearingly conservative – a history filled with repression of new and revolutionary ideas. We all are familiar with such examples of repression as the Vatican's crusade against Galileo, but Kuhn shows how the scientific community itself has often been as repressive of scientific innovation as any religious or social group. »

Marc Bloch's core idea that improving our knowledge of the past will help us better solve the problems of the present can also easily be extended to the History of Prehistory. There is great wisdom in the words of the previously cited Piero Coppo:

Perhaps answers could come from those who despite it all, despite the obligation of the mono-dimensionality of thought, existence and culture, continue to seriously employ the ways, ancient or modern, ethnic or newly invented, or hybridized ones, of entering non-ordinary states of consciousness in safety and with others; to make then something of them that isn't merely a reaction, a temporary and sometime dangerous escape from the insupportability of the present consensus world-view. Today it seems to me important to avoid advertising's blinding dazzle, completely separated from the leaden greyness of everyday life; but rather to make efforts at mediation, transport, a fusion. Bring the *here* to the *there* as much as possible, and what is there here, make the interface, the seams, the passage last; see that the doors of perception remain ajar, and that the journey is transformed into a lasting enrichment, resulting in a more complete way of living, seeing, and experiencing the world. Some experts who work in the field call this *integration*: receiving, understanding, assimilating what is gradually being explored, transforming the individual experience into a collective proposal, aware that there is no health unless one succeeds in integrating what there is in the night with what there is in the day, what was before with what comes after, traditions and science; to go in a direction to which we feel we belong, towards a place that is still unknown.