

Books of The Times

# Marijuana—Cops and Docs

By ROGER JELLINEK

**MARIJUANA RECONSIDERED.** By Lester Grinspoon, M.D. 413 pages. Harvard University Press. Cloth, \$9.95. Paper, \$2.45.

If there were enough jails in the United States to lock up the estimated total of 20 million marijuana users, they would face possible sentences of six months to life, depending on where they were arrested and the subjective views of their judges. Any who are looking to the current National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse for some objective rationale for marijuana prohibition are not likely to see any major change as a result of the commission's report due next March. After a backroom battle between the National Institutes of Mental Health and the Justice Department, President Nixon appointed nine of the latter's nominees out of the commission's total of 13 members, and he has already stated categorically that even if the commission recommends that marijuana be legalized, he will never go along. Before the hearings even started, the commission's staff director stated that "he could write the report right now."

Marijuana was first made illegal in 1937, on the argument by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics that the drug was addictive and led to brutal crime and sexual aggressiveness. This line was discarded for a stepping-stone theory—marijuana leads its users to ever greater kicks and hard drugs. This in turn has been abandoned by most anti-marijuana experts (with the notable exception of President Nixon) in favor of a theory of psychological dependency and consequent social degeneracy. The clincher, and the argument that the commission is most likely to go for, is that nothing should change because simply not enough is known about marijuana that justifies permitting it as just another recreational drug like tobacco and alcohol. It is this argument that is made to look thoroughly absurd by Dr. Lester Grinspoon, who seems ideally qualified to do so as an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and director of psychiatric research at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center.

## General Properties Known

Dr. Grinspoon confirms that there is much confusion in the reportage on the effects of marijuana. The *cannabis sativa* plant is found in at least 100 varieties; it is chemically unstable in its natural form; and its potency is very much related to the dose taken. Nevertheless, Dr. Grinspoon argues, the use of marijuana is so ancient and so extensive that it is quite possible to document the general properties of marijuana intoxication. Confusion about these properties is the result much more of the bias of the language used to describe them than of the complexities of the drug itself.

This is not entirely the fault of hostile critics. In an impressive investigation of the literary mythology of marijuana, Dr.

Grinspoon takes a close look at the influential claims to both ecstasy and terror of a number of 19th-century Romantics such as Gautier and Baudelaire, and shows that their experiences with hashish (a form of cannabis 5 to 8 times as strong as marijuana) were exaggerated literary fantasies or outright lies (Baudelaire attributed his decline to hashish, but in fact died of alcoholism and syphilis), and contrasts them with some impressive, though far more modest contemporary literary evidence by Allen Ginsberg and others.

Far more impressive still is Dr. Grinspoon's detailed comparative documentation of some two dozen frequently described properties of marijuana intoxi-

cation. Here the bias of the reporting really shows. "Dreamy fantasies" are described as "delirious" or "disordered" hallucinations; "passive" smokers can be "lacking in incentive," and if they become "exhilarated" they can also be "manic." The drug is "mind-altering" or "mind-distorting"; the slowing of the user's sense of time can be "temporal disintegration"; his synesthesia (mixing of the senses) can be "confusion," and so on.

Dr. Grinspoon emphasizes that marijuana is a psychoactive drug and can certainly cause problems if the basic personality structure of the user is weak, if the dose is too strong, or if the situation in which it is used is fraught with anxiety. But he points out that these problems are temporary, and mild compared to those caused by alcohol and tobacco, let alone the commonly prescribed amphetamines and barbiturates. And far from being addictive, marijuana users tend to need less as they smoke more. Death has never been proved to be the result of a marijuana overdose, nor has there been any evidence of cellular damage.

## Legalization With Regulation

In fact, as Dr. Grinspoon reports, cannabis has considerable medical potential. This was well-known in the 19th century, but the combination of new synthetic drugs (such as aspirin and barbiturates) and social prohibition literally drove the drug out of the official pharmacopoeia in 1941. Recent success in synthesizing the active constituents of cannabis once again opens up a number of medical possibilities, from tropical anesthetics to antidepressants to the prevention and treatment of migraines and, ironically, because it is not addictive, to facilitate the withdrawal from alcohol and opiate addictions.

Dr. Grinspoon's medical case against marijuana prohibition would seem to be overwhelming, especially when added to the ridicule and damage suffered by the

legal system, as was so eloquently demonstrated by John Kaplan in his "Marijuana: The New Prohibition" last year. They both advocate legalization and strict regulation of the drug, available only to 18-year-olds and over. But both authors acknowledge that mountains of evidence of harmlessness and miles of fine logic have little to do with public attitudes to marijuana, for or against.

Kaplan explained the prohibition in terms of generational war. Dr. Grinspoon takes this much further, and suggests that both advocates and enemies are psychologically displacing anxieties about similar things, in opposite directions. Those against marijuana see prohibition as a symbolic barrier to a culture's disintegration, a culture threatened by unmanageable phenomena such as the constant menace of The Bomb.

Those for, especially the students, see the culture itself as the source of that kind of threat. Some become activists. Others decide that if "the past is irrelevant and the future is ominous, one's meaningfulness must be found within the immediate context of one's own present experience. But in fact it is not just found; it is created largely from within. Such experiences as encounter groups, transcendental meditation, sensitivity training, psychotherapy, and, to some extent, sexual exploration, are all means toward this end. What better catalyst than cannabis and/or the hallucinogens?" Dr. Grinspoon's explanation may be right, but it's a dismal conclusion to have to accept.