

Building a Movement The 2005 International Drug Policy Reform Conference



By Jag Davies
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“WHO ARE WE?” questioned Drug Policy Alliance (DPA) Executive Director Ethan Nadelman, before a crowd of nearly 1,000 participants assembled in Long Beach at the Opening Plenary of the DPA’s biennial International Drug Policy Reform (IDPR) conference. “We are the people who love drugs. We are the people who hate drugs. And, we are the people who don’t care about drugs.” Yet, dialogue at the conference revolved around one common principle: the War on Drugs is doing more harm than good.

“This movement is growing and being empowered by people who care about our fundamental rights and freedoms, who care about sensible and pragmatic use of government resources, and who care about the 2.2 million people who will go to sleep behind prison bars tonight just in this country,” explained Nadelman.

This talk set the tone for a wide-ranging and arousing look at the costs and consequences of drug prohibition. For the people suffering the collateral damage of the War on Drugs, the growing drug policy reform movement is “not merely about the right to smoke a joint,” said Nadelman. Rather, for the tens of millions of people who have been imprisoned or debilitated by the Drug War, it is about daily survival in the face of employment discrimination, inadequate health care, the prison-industrial complex, institutionalized racism, and a failure to address the root causes of addiction.

With such a range of urgent issues, the conference drew an impressive array of participants with diverse experiences and backgrounds. Groups at the conference ranged from current and former law enforcement and prosecutors to the formerly incarcerated fighting to restore their rights, from religious leaders to scientists, from politicians to medical marijuana patients, from lawyers to needle

exchange workers, and of course, a contingent of activists and researchers working to reform the politics and practice of psychedelic and marijuana research.

And this list hardly does justice to the scope of a conference that featured 73 sessions over three long, energetic days. Considering this was my first IDPR Conference (which I attended thanks to a generous scholarship program supported by Robert E. Field of Common Sense for Drug Policy), I felt both overwhelmed and empowered by the breadth of passion, resolve, and expertise that I encountered among fellow participants.

Although the drug policy reform movement, like MAPS, has achieved unprecedented and once-unimaginable success over the past decade, during the course of the conference I realized that we will not pacify the Drug War until a critical mass of social institutions — such as business associations, teacher-parent groups, local governments, bar associations, and religious organizations —

mobilize in support of sensible drug policy. At the 2005 IDPR conference, the largest drug policy reform conference ever, tantalizing inklings of this critical mass surfaced. However, it was clear that in order to build on the successes of the past decade, the drug reform movement must strive to be even more inclusive.

Reform From The Inside-Out

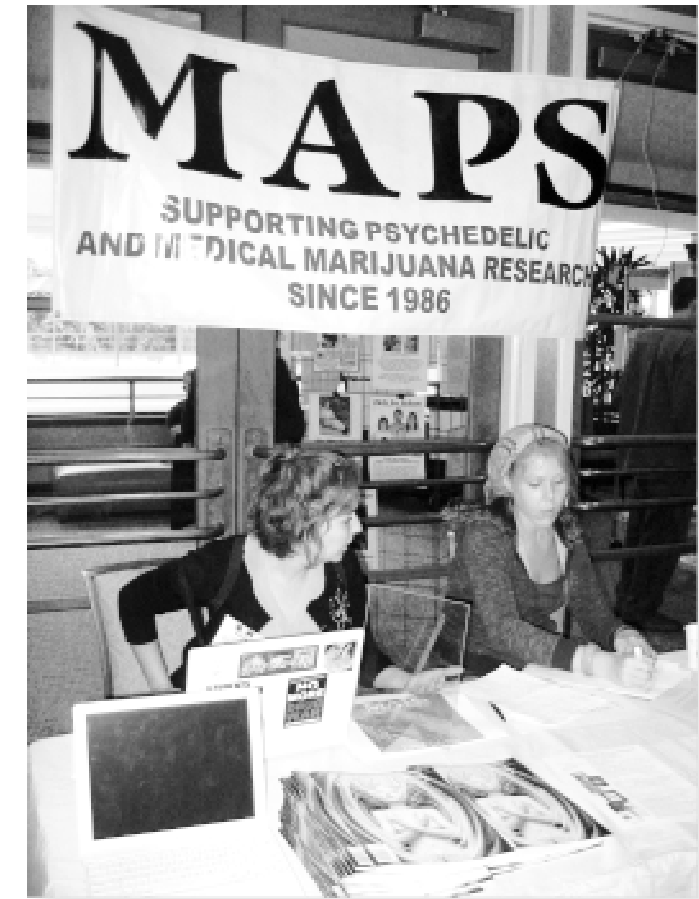
Inclusive, first of all, by seeking to reform, from the “inside-out,” the institutions that govern our daily lives. This means educating others about the War on Drugs and becoming an agent of change, whether at the dinner table, at work, or at a community meeting.

In a session entitled, “Forming Coalitions and Transforming Institutions: The Benefits and Challenges of Organizing Key Constituencies,” Interfaith Drug Policy Initiative (IDPI) founder Charles Thomas urged, “Figure out who you are and who you can work with ... The next stage of the drug policy reform movement is mobilizing major social institutions, and to do this, people who understand the harms of the Drug War need to become the insiders of these institutions. To effect change at an institutional level, you have to know a particular group inside and out.” Thomas has embodied this approach: a dedicated Unitarian Universalist (UU), he formed UU’s for Drug Policy Reform (UUDPR), and has worked within his denomination and with others to mobilize religious support for alternatives to the War on Drugs.

More broadly, Ethan Nadelman stressed that to be an effective leader, we must know ourselves inside and out. “We need to teach others but we also need to keep teaching ourselves ... We need to respect and understand people’s prejudices and fears, and we can’t do this unless we keep challenging ourselves and confronting our own prejudices and fears.”

Reform From The Grassroots

Furthermore, the drug policy reform movement must strive to be more inclusive by working with the communities that have been hit hardest by the Drug War: immigrants, low-income families, and demographic minorities, particularly Latin American and African-American communities. Six session topics were



MAPS staffers Julia Onnie-Hay and Falon Mihalic distributing MAPS materials to conference participants

devoted to race, ethnicity, and class, and overlapping topics included prison reform, voting rights, narco-imperialism, and education. The sessions addressing race-related topics were some of the most well-attended and rousing gatherings for the diverse, yet primarily Anglo-American, conference attendees.

The Drug War’s role as a tool to perpetuate racially-biased criminal justice, disenfranchisement, and institutionalized poverty was a common topic of discussion, and no matter how many times the same statistics were repeated, they seemed to send a collective startle through the conscience of the audience each time. Here are a few*:

The US has the highest incarceration rate and the largest prison population of any country in the world, over 2.2 million, thanks to the Drug War. There are more drug prisoners in the US than there are total prisoners in Europe, even though Europe has 100 million more people. Even

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though African-Americans represent 13% of the total US population, and 13% of total drug users, they are seven times more likely to be incarcerated on drug charges. As a result, there are more black men in prison now than there were black men under slavery at its height in the US, and there are more disenfranchised black men today than there were at the height of 'Jim Crow' segregation. In several major cities such as New York City and Washington D.C., nearly one out of two black men are disenfranchised. Meanwhile, 75% of US prisoners classified as "Latino" have been sentenced on drug charges, and Latinos, like African-Americans, are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system—about one-quarter of total prisoners, totaling over 500,000—meaning that there are at least 375,000 Latinos imprisoned in the US on drug charges.

Each time I heard these statistics, I comprehended the incomprehensible a little more tangibly: the Drug War is a human rights catastrophe. At the end of a stirring panel entitled "Race, Racism, and the Drug War," an elderly African-American woman in the audience stood up and said, "They used to hang my people from trees and lynch them, I saw it ... Nowadays, they're lynching more of us than ever, but they're smarter; now they hang us in a courtroom instead of from a tree."

Where Does MAPS Fit In?

In the face of such monumental injustice, where does MAPS fit in? For me, the IDPR conference was an opportunity to integrate the strategies of the drug policy reform movement with MAPS' struggles for scientific freedom.

One thing I realized is that MAPS has a unique strategic advantage because of its medical focus; the government, the public, and the media are more comfortable with psychedelics and marijuana when they are placed in a medical context. Considering that most legislative and judicial options for drug policy reform have failed, particularly the Supreme Court's ruling in *Gonzalez v. Raich*, scientific research may be the best avenue for reform remaining. Moreover, the obstruction of legitimate and widely demanded scientific research on marijuana underscores the irrationality

of the War on Drugs by revealing the political contingency of scientific "truth."

At the IDPR conference, Rick Doblin represented MAPS in three session panels. In "The Politics of Science," he discussed the distorting and destructive influence of politics on government agencies' research agendas, particularly in relation to MAPS' proposed medical marijuana production facility at UMass-Amherst. In "Psychedelic Therapy: MDMA, Iboga, and Psilocybin," Doblin, MAPS Clinical Research Associate Valerie Mojeiko, and UCLA psychiatrist Dr. Charles Grob discussed the history of psychedelic therapy and reviewed the latest research, highlighted by an inspiring testimonial from Pamela, a woman with advanced-stage cancer who was recently treated in Dr. Grob's psilocybin/anxiety disorder study. And in "The Future of Medical Marijuana," Doblin joined four leading policy experts to discuss long-term approaches for protecting the rights of medical marijuana patients.**

As a small branch of a small but growing movement, the unique focus of MAPS' mission is both our greatest strength and our Achilles heel. Interest groups can become vulnerable when they are isolated into discrete factions; they become more effective when they share resources and implement wholesale reform that encompasses their common visions.

The IDPR conference demonstrated that there are countless groups and individuals whose interests can overlap with psychedelic research and drug policy reform — but those links require reaching out. As some speakers pointed out, working for social justice necessarily involves embracing and utilizing inclusive narratives that appeal to the shared values of people with different backgrounds and political persuasions. By developing inclusive narratives, movements for individual freedom and social integrity become interconnected and reinforce one another by "working to confront people's fear, to show that by pandering to people's deep fears, we are actually creating them," as DPA Board Member and CODEPINK co-founder Jodie Evans put it during a conference panel.

Here again, MAPS' work with psychedelic-assisted therapy becomes relevant. One of the most well-documented psychological phenomena associated with psychedelic therapy is the ability for individuals to confront, accept, and make peace with their deepest fears. By working through deep fears, people can gain the ability to approach the "Other" with an open mind and an open heart.

Speaking of "Other," when I returned to the MAPS office, I found a copy of a letter on my desk from conservative icon Grover Norquist in support of MAPS' medical marijuana production facility. While I have some fundamental discrepancies with Norquist's vision of the world, I still find it encouraging that MAPS has found this common point of interest. Like Norquist's letter, the IDPR conference reminded me that MAPS' uniqueness will be more of a strength than a weakness as long as we continue to discover and develop these common interests.

A Long Road

The strength of the 2005 IDPR conference was that it not only united various groups opposed to the Drug War within a common narrative of "reason, compassion, and justice," it gave participants a sense of the need to work continuously as agents of change in all facets of their lives. To end the War on Drugs, people of diverse backgrounds must generate the same sense of moral urgency that inspired the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. Yet, that movement also serves as a stark reminder that working for social justice requires long-term persistence. "Even if this movement is successful, and prohibition ends, what then?" asked Students for Sensible Drug Policy Director Scarlett Swardlow. "We probably won't get it right the first time. Even then we would need to keep working vigilantly." Charles Thomas added, "If prohibition ends, other forms of problematic discrimination against drug users and abusers may continue, such as loss of child custody rights, employment discrimination, urine testing, and so on. Just by changing a law, institutionalized patterns of discrimination are not necessarily affected ... For example, even after segregation supposedly ended, institutionalized racism still continued."

Realizing the tremendous scope of what drug policy reformers are struggling for, I came away from my first IDPR conference with the conviction that real and lasting change in drug policy can only be achieved by building on the common interests of as many different types of people as possible. I also saw how MAPS has a special role to play in this movement, not just by implementing scientific research that establishes the medical uses of psychedelics and marijuana, but also by developing tools that help people work through their deepest fears and form a healthier society that values the full potential of all human life. •

* For Drug War statistics, see www.drugwarfacts.org

** To read more about the IDPR conference sessions see www.drugpolicy.org/events/dpa2005



MAPS President Rick Doblin, MAPS Patron Member Richard Wolfe, and IDEAL Reform Director Matt Atwood at the IDPR conference