

From ergot to LSD. Materiality, local and global knowledge in the agricultural, industrial and scientific production of psychotropic substances

The history of LSD and its creator, Albert Hofmann, has been told many times. What is lacking is the history of the raw material, *ergot* in particular, enabling its production. The investigation into the processes of selection, breeding and growing of suitable crop sorts as well as vaccination, planting and harvesting will reveal complex interactions on a large scale. LSD and other compounds deriving from ergot could be produced only on the basis of countless negotiations between the pharmaceutical industry, scientists, and farmers.

Production, circulation, and exploitation of psychotropic substances in a setting of social, cultural, and epistemic inequalities will be analysed not only in the Swiss context but equally from a global perspective. Discovery and research on substances closely linked to LSD like Psilocybin and Ololiuqui took place in a cross-cultural environment. Knowledge and know-how acquired in this processes fostered the formation of ethnomycology and ethnobotany and raised questions regarding the “objective element” of the substances. The project thus follows the traces of wonder drugs in Albert Hofmann’s papers at the Institute for the History of Medicine in Bern (publicly accessible for the first time) and the rich but hitherto unstudied Sandoz holdings in the Novartis Company Archive in order to complement narratives and cultural interpretations of substances with their material production and with the search for the material essence of their effects.

Keywords: History of biotechnology, history of plant cultivation, history of pharmacy, history of medicine, business history (Sandoz/Novartis), ergot, Albert Hofmann