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Review/Reseña

Paul Gootenberg, *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

Tracking Cocaine

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When Cole Porter innocently admitted in the catchy tune he wrote for the 1934 Broadway hit *Anything Goes*, that “some get a kick from cocaine,” he could not have imagined that today, some twenty million Americans snort-up between \$38 and \$70 billion dollars worth of this emblematic Andean commodity; or that in the last four years nearly ten thousand people have met violent death competing for the American market in the so-called Mexican Drug Wars. If the consumption and death figures have a broad range it’s because it is very hard to arrive at sound data for illegal substances and often-clandestine murders.

Paul Gootenberg's intelligently conceived, remarkably researched, and at times somewhat over-written account, eschews the present dramatic and violent conflicts that occur daily along the Mexican-United States border or among rival gangs in Michoacán or the Gulf States, and takes us instead on a tour de force of Andean Cocaine, beginning with the history of the coca plant itself [*Erythroxylum coca*], native to the northwestern Andes, and ending with chapters on The Drug Boom associated with the rise of the Birth of the Narcos, into the 1980s.

The range of subjects in this deep and broadly researched book is as engaging and dramatic as any lurid Hollywood film of the drug wars. A few examples: there is arcane pharmacological detail on the German chemists' original efforts to extract cocaine from the coca leaf at Gottingen University in the 1850s; the remarkable story of the less-known Alfredo Bignon, a French-born Peruvian professor of pharmacy and chemistry who, in the 1880s, worked out a kerosene precipitation method to make a 60 percent "crude cocaine," a kind of early *pasta básica*, that made the later lucrative global trade a lot easier. Not limiting himself to Andean leaf or processed cocaine, Gootenberg provides a global perspective on the plant with an account of the migration of the coca plant to other parts of the planet and particularly of the success of both Dutch and Japanese coca leaf and cocaine producers. By 1920, Dutch planters exported nearly 2000 metric tons of the Java high-alkaloid leaf (out of a strain developed in Kew Gardens), thus satisfying a large share of the annual global cocaine market (then only 12 tons). After WW-I, the Japanese joined the trade, acquiring a 225 square mile property in the prime coca zone of the Huallaga valley of Peru, converted the leaf to cocaine back in Japan, and by 1930 became "one of the largest producers and purveyors of cocaine to east and Southeast Asia" (128). The Second World War abruptly disrupted the global pretensions of both Dutch and Japanese planters.

Professor Gootenberg's previous work on other Andean commodities and his embrace of the concept of commodity chains, "a heuristic or analytical tool that considers goods in the light of their global connectedness," provides the conceptual apparatus that enables him to track the flow of coca leaf and cocaine through an ever-shifting global

frame (106). This he does beginning at the agricultural ground level with the wide variety of plants native to the Andes: the differences, for example between Huánuco leaf (best for cocaine) and Trujillo leaf (good for extracts), the latter especially excellent for use in Coca-Cola. The linked of coca leaf (and later, pasta básica) continues upward through various means of processing, to the fluctuating consumption of global markets.

Other books and articles have explored the extraordinary success of Coca-Cola and its connection with the coca leaf but it's hard to imagine that anyone, in terms of political economy, will surpass Gootenberg's treatment here. From the day in 1886, when John Pemberton cooked up his immortal brew of herbs, seeds, sugar, caffeine, and coca leaves in a copper vat over a wood fire, to a mere decade later, the company was importing annually around a thousand metric tons of coca leaf and 80 bottling plants were up and running. During WW II, specially designed handling equipment was designed so that Coca-Cola bottles might be carried in tanks, planes, and jeeps without breaking. No wonder the curvy, full figured bottle with red and white colors drawn from the flag became America's drink, and the company itself a powerful national political lobby to insure access to Peruvian leaf.

Large, original sections of the book examine the efforts of early federal anti-drug agencies, which merged into the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in 1930, in turn succeeded by the DEA in 1973, to deal with Andean cocaine. Gootenberg has dug deeply into these valuable archives to help create his book. In the early 20th century, the United States had been "the world capital of coca and cocaine usage" (and abuse), but the fact that coca imports and cocaine production came to be concentrated in just two firms, Maywood Chemical and nearby New Jersey Merck, made control fairly easy, as the author says, by "pinching off the top" of the industry. Maywood made the famously secret Merchandise No. 5, a de-cocainized extract of the coca leaf for Coca Cola, while Merck had a monopoly on high-grade medicinal cocaine, made out of Maywood's Coca Cola's residue. "In effect," the author points out, in the 1920s "all American cocaine was a by-product of the Coca Cola chain." (138) By WW II, as "addiction to Coca-Cola rose," more Andean coca leaf found its way into soft drinks than into

medicinal cocaine. Gootenberg treats the rich archival material in this section—and in the following chapter more tightly focused on control—with a sure hand, weaving together consumption patterns, Andean production and state policy. The last chapter of the book turns from the long history of drug supply to an attempt to identify the determinants of demand or drug consumption.

Gootenberg is not exactly a fan of President Nixon's drug policy. Indeed, "it was the political regime of cold warrior Richard M. Nixon (1968-74) that bequeathed the destructive age of American cocaine of the 1970s and 1980s." Like the South American *supply* of cocaine, North American drug *demand*, the author believes, was politically constructed" (307). But while the discussion of the supply side of Andean Cocaine draws on a wealth of research ranging from coca leaf agriculture through commodity chains to pharmacological innovation, markets, and state policy, the demand or consumption side of the cocaine story is less fully developed.

There's no doubt that cocaine—as well as other drug consumption—took off in the 1970s and skyrocketed in the 80s. *But how can this be explained?* In fact, why does an ever-fluctuating number of people smoke, snort, drink, or ingest mind-altering commodities they don't "need"? Understandably, the author tiptoes cautiously into the morass of explanation. At times there almost seems to be an implicit assumption in his analysis that a certain segment of modern human society is inevitably susceptible to drug use but not especially devoted to one or the other substance. If heroin is proscribed, cocaine takes its place; if cocaine is repressed, we turn to pot. Economic analysis helps a bit, but it's obvious that the role of price alone is inconclusive. For example, when prices for cocaine fell in the 1980s, as one might expect, its use (especially for cheaper "crack") increased among urban African Americans. But the same price decline also led to *lower* consumption of cocaine amid the hot tub, peacock feather-wielding denizens of Marin County. The problem with connecting price to consumption is that we can't create a counter-factual situation and run the film over again. We can observe that as prices fall, cocaine consumption falls. But it may have anyway, for other reasons. Professor Gootenberg, of course, knows all this and equally obviously there is no easy

answer. He also knows that explanation may be found in that black box called culture, for several decades now a fundamental resource in the tool kit of the cultural anthropologists. Gootenberg, in the final chapter, rather glancingly takes up the importance of culture in consumption.

In the many attempts at drug control, there was no lack of attempts at repression. President Nixon created a vast new agency, the Drug Enforcement Administration, as part of a “war on drugs” in 1973. Originally aimed at heroin, Nixon soon “directed his legendary political ire” against marijuana, but both these efforts had scant impact on the overall drug scene and in Gootenberg’s view, this “harassment” served only to accelerate the use of a third narcotic, cocaine. By 1977, there were an estimated 4.1 million regular coke users in the United States. The disruption of the “French Connection” pipeline in mid 1960s “drove sellers and buyers to cocaine” (309); and while the aerial spraying of Mexican hemp fields and tighter border control (Operation Intercept) created a shortage of pot for American consumers, the savvy Colombian cartels quickly perceived the opportunity to market the more compact and upscale cocaine. Gootenberg is acutely aware of the ironic aspect of drug control. “Only the rapid success of American pressures after WW-II would transform cocaine into a novel and highly dynamic illicit commodity.”(217)

When the flood of imports by the later ‘70s caused Colombian cocaine prices to fall, that illicit substance became the drug of choice among the white middle class, “particularly in major cities up and down the California coast.” There were also, apparently, unintended consequences. By the 1980s, the deepening slide in cocaine prices, “an unwitting effect of continuously upping the ante against South American traffickers, combined with the drug’s market saturation, led to cocaine’s diversification into low-income African American retail markets: the crack boom,” which had the social play out of racial hysteria as blacks became identified with drug-related violence (312).

Gootenberg suggests, without giving in to a facile explanation, an association between the enormous surge in cocaine use in the 1980s and 90s with the onset of “the energized, get-rich quick American entrepreneurialism,” seen emblematically in “fast-living-luxury-

automaker-turned-cocaine-importer John DeLorean.” Or in New York’s celebrated club Studio 54, “a pulsating temple of cocaine culture,” an all-night orgy of sex, drugs and conspicuous consumption (311). On the other side of the savage capitalist coin, the author suggests the coincidence of rising drug use with the youthful defiance of conformist cold war corporate culture.

The book is not an easy read. Because the author has chosen an intellectually satisfying analytical mode of exposition rather than a more simplistic narrative, the research on individual topics is stretched out in multiple, parallel strands chronologically. Thus, for example, the material on Coca-Cola may be found in several latitudinal segments beginning in 1892 down to the 1950s. Although effective as analysis, this leads to quite a lot of repetitious switchbacks. I don’t want to criticize the approach, merely to point out the tradeoff here between narrative clarity and exacting analysis. Perhaps because the research is so dense, because the author has so much material at hand—and I’m sure much had to be cut—the prose occasionally seems crowded, tortured, even opaque; at the same time straining for tight analysis at times leads the author to unnecessarily complex and even tangled sentences that turn in upon themselves. These stylistic quibbles should not detract from a superior book; after all, we historians are not meant to be poets.

In short, Paul Gootenberg has given us his most accomplished book to date, a work widely researched and deeply pondered that brings to bear a vast array of information and ideas relevant to the global history of cocaine.