



Paul Gootenberg. *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 442 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3229-5; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5905-6.



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P. Gootenberg: Andean Cocaine

In 1884, in a small laboratory in downtown Lima, a French immigrant named Alfredo Bignon invented a simple means of extracting cocaine from dried coca leaves using kerosene, soda ash, and lime. While the process produced a cocaine of considerably lower quality than what could be achieved using advanced laboratory techniques, Bignon's method had world-historical implications.

Since its discovery 25 years earlier, cocaine had been hailed throughout the West as a modern marvel. A powerful and precise local anesthetic, the drug revolutionized eye and other difficult surgeries. Also a powerful stimulant, experts declared cocaine a safe and effective remedy for "brain workers," those busy, white-collar managers of modern industry and urban life who needed something extra to get them through the day.

Prior to Bignon's discovery, cocaine was mostly refined in German laboratories, far from the humid eastern Andes where the plant had thrived for millennia. The distance was especially problematic because coca leaves did not travel well, often losing their potency in the long ride out of the mountains and across the Atlantic. It was

precisely this problem that the energetic, forty-one year old Bignon had successfully solved.

The discovery uncorked a supply bottleneck that had limited the availability (and raised the price) of the drug just as doctors and consumers in North Atlantic markets were catching cocaine fever. A boom in marketing and sales ensued, followed shortly thereafter by a wave of buyers' remorse, especially in the United States, where the putative "evil" of "cocainism" drove reformers to crack down on the distribution of both cocaine and products made from raw coca, its far less potent precursor. Thus began a century-long crusade by the U.S. and other nations to stamp out the use of this substance, which, in turn, fueled the growth of a massive and extraordinarily profitable illicit market supplied by violent and powerful criminal organizations. But here too Bignon played a role, for it was during the late 1940s that his method, long forgotten by Western science, allowed the original "narcos" to begin quietly producing the first batches of fully illicit cocaine.

Paul Gootenberg's new book masterfully weaves together these and the many other threads of cocaine's fas-

cinating history. Through primary documents mined in the archives of four countries, Gootenberg successfully links the global and the local, or *glocal*, while illuminating the interaction between political, economic, and cultural factors in this transnational story. Gootenberg has written a great book; as fine a historical work as we have on any illicit drug.

Gootenberg's study is organized around commodity chains, those extremely useful constructs that allow researchers to maintain the *thread* of complex transnational processes. Commodity chains are also effective means of studying the economic consequences of culture, or the cultural consequences of economics, on a world-historical scale. With roots in both Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems theory and Arjun Appadurai's *Social Life of Things*, the approach is widely appealing, perhaps especially so to historians of Latin America for whom commodities—*From Silver to Cocaine*, as the title of a recent volume succinctly puts it—have long been of paramount interest. It is an approach that is ideally suited to cocaine's global history.

Native to the Andes, coca has been chewed by Indians there for thousands of years. It has been known worldwide since the Conquest, when the Spanish described it, moved to ban it, and then reversed course because Indian labor relied on it. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, coca remained an exotic curiosity outside of South America; a reliable part of Andean travelers' accounts, perhaps, but little more. Nineteenth century booms in medical science, botany, and global commerce changed all of that. Around midcentury coca began to gain attention throughout the Atlantic World as a potentially miraculous provider of energy and health. Then, in 1860, a Göttingen University doctoral student named Albert Niemann successfully isolated the plant's most critical alkaloid for the first time. Niemann named the new drug *cocain*.

Bignon's story illustrates many of the book's major themes. His scientific excellence on the periphery demonstrates Peruvian agency, thus challenging old *dependista* models of Latin American commodity exports. His French roots highlight the importance of immigrants and diaspora in lubricating global trade, a phenomenon that reemerges over and over in the narrative. Even his failures are illustrative. Bignon would quickly fade into obscurity after German firms adopted his unpatented method, linked them to transatlantic Germanic pharmaceutical networks, and squeezed Bignon out of the market. Bignon, it turned out, had been linked to the wrong

commodity chain: his networks in France (where coca-based products, rather than cocaine, dominated) proved no match for rapidly expanding German pharmaceutical hegemony. Here Gootenberg demonstrates the importance of contingency, where lucky ties to the right commodity chain could determine success or failure.

But the Germans were not the only Europeans to find success in coca/cocaine. By 1905, Dutch coca experiments in colonial Java began to thrive. These large plantations proved considerably more efficient than Peruvian operations still mired in traditional peasant folkways and the extreme geography of the Andes. In the face of this challenge, a few enlightened Peruvian voices, namely Augusto Durand, saw the need to modernize Peruvian production, but it was too late. Peruvian agency had fallen short for reasons that are not completely clear. Could Bignon's invention not have been protected from intellectual theft? And why didn't more Peruvians recognize that European competitors would seek ways to cut Peru out of the market completely as had already occurred with Peru-bark? Despite the inherent Andean advantages, somehow the Dutch rose from coca obscurity to dominate a market that many Peruvians considered an Andean birthright.

The next several decades would be marked by Peruvian efforts to resuscitate their declining cocaine industry, though these proved quixotic in the face of rising prohibitory regimes. After World War II the last remaining Peruvian licit cocaine manufacturers were shut down, though from their ashes would quickly emerge a new brand of *illicit* cocaine (meaning, in Gootenberg's definition, product produced specifically for the black market rather than cocaine diverted from licit sources). As midcentury nightlife hotspots like Havana saw consumer taste for cocaine increase, cosmopolitan entrepreneurs began shaping informal, illicit commodity chains from the Andes outward. Cocaine increasingly gained adherents, its daring suppliers gained experience, and in the 1970s a tipping point was reached for whatever reason (Gootenberg can only speculate), soon making cocaine Enemy #1 of U.S. drug warriors.

Gootenberg has long championed the rise of a *new drug history* based in multi-archival primary research and informed by work in multiple disciplines. He certainly succeeds on this count. But *new* should not be confused with *revisionist*. While Gootenberg emphasizes the importance of Andean agency, the U.S. and its unofficial agents (e.g. the Coca Cola Company) still seek hegemony and Peru still resists. But the work deepens

our knowledge of Peru's role considerably. Andean Cocaine offers something that the historiography of drugs in the Americas has sorely lacked: a well researched and highly informed view from Latin America. In that sense, this drug history is certainly new.

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