Teaching the History of Drugs as Commodities: A Talk with Historian Paul Gootenberg

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Paul Gootenberg is SUNY Distinguished Professor of History and Sociology at Stony Brook University (New York) and Chair of History. He is a global commodity and drug historian trained as a Latin Americanist at the University of Chicago and Oxford. His works include Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug (UNC Press, 2008), Cocaine: Global Histories (Routledge, 1999) and with Liliana M. Dávalos, The Origins of Cocaine: Peasant Colonization and Failed Development in the Amazon Andes (Routledge, 2018). From 2011-14 he chaired the Drugs, Security and Democracy fellowship (DSD) of the Soros Open Society Foundation and Social Science Research Council. Gootenberg is General Editor of the forthcoming Oxford Handbook of Drug History and President-elect 2021of the Alcohol and Drugs History Society (ADHS). He regularly teaches courses at Stony Brook about the history of commodities and drugs. What follows is an edited transcript of an interview he had with Elisabet Rasch, one of the editors of the Teaching Commodity Frontiers section, in February 2021.

Elisabet: How long have you been teaching courses like 'The History of Drugs in the Americas?'

Paul: I began as a more conventional economic historian, trained in the 1980s. I worked on trade policy, but was always drawn to commodities. My first couple of books were about guano, which was a huge export boom product from Peru in the 19th century. And it got me kind of a name in that area of economic history, perhaps, in retrospect, as a specialist in odd commodities! Commodities melded into my interest in drugs in the mid-1990s, as I got fascinated by cocaine and drug history in a broader sense.

While I was entering this new area of research and writing, I developed courses that would go with it, and you can sometimes learn a lot from doing the courses that clarify issues. By the late 1990s, I was already trying out courses on the history of drugs.

And then shortly after that, I wrote a chapter for a volume, called *Between Silver and Cocaine*. That book, about commodity chains in the long run, had a notable impact in the field of Latin American history. We met many times as a commodity studies group, long before it



became the international field it is today, with multiple seminar series and even Ivy league glamor. By 2000, I had defined myself as a commodities historian. I began teaching specialized courses, especially at the graduate level, about the history of commodities.

I used to have 70 or 80 students in my undergrad commodity history course. But now with the history enrollments going down, it's more like 25, so it's more intimate. With the history of drugs, I decided to never teach a large lecture course. I just didn't want to get that notoriety. I would only focus on reading-intensive seminars with undergraduates, you know, 20, 15 students, maybe 30 students, because I wanted them to learn to grapple with these texts that I thought were far more serious about drugs, and not see the field as something sensationalistic.

You can imagine the types of students you might get who were like, wow, that's so cool, you might get a suspicious crowd! And I genuinely want to make it into something that can be intellectually uplifting. I make that clear when I teach these types of classes. I say, the one thing I don't want you to do in this class is spill out your subjective opinions about drugs, your drug experiences. We're going to look at challenging texts. We're going to try to really critically interrogate categories of thinking about "drugs."

Elisabet: So, students reading serious texts is your way of dealing with the sensational part of teaching drugs history?

Paul: Yeah, I try to bring in new academic books and to make it about intellectual controversies. My main drug seminar, which I teach to small groups of like 20-30 students, I start with reading Wolfgang Schivelbush's book. He's a well-known German writer who wrote an early influential book, Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants and Intoxicants. It's a great idea-generating book about what mind-altering "drugs" are, and how their meanings change over time. It's an eye-opener for students, using the European history of coffee, tobacco and alcohol. It conveys what sociologists might call the "social constructivist" perspective on drugs, mixed with Marx and Weber as well.

Recently I began contrasting it with more rigorous academic work, especially the book by Marcy Norton, Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World. It's about the same time period, but she develops a quite different thesis about the ways that drugs travel across Atlantic space and carry symbolic meanings and transform their meanings over timemany of which originate, in her view, in subaltern or indigenous cultures of the Americas.

Elisabet: What's the importance of teaching this historical dimension of drugs?

Paul: Well, it is a fascinating topic and writings about drugs are both more and more interesting and more and more rigorous. It's a good tool for developing students' reading and critical skills and they just get a far more deeper understanding of the historical or social roots of the ways we think about drugs today. Drugs are not at all new, and students learn that most drugs were not even strictly illegal until the early 20th century. They also might gain new ways of reasonably assessing the failures of drug prohibition in the United States and globally, and for understanding the current opioid "epidemic" in the United States and the unprecedented scale and changing composition of its victims. With all the turmoil surrounding drugs, having a more rigorous background in these debates helps.

Elisabet: How do you use "drugs" as a way of looking at political, colonial and decolonial relationships in your courses?

Paul: In my advanced commodities graduate seminar, now called "Commodity Histories and Modern Capitalism," I begin with a book by Timothy Brook called, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World.* It's superb. He's a specialist on China, but he intricately connects what begins to happen in China and East Asia in the 16th and 17th century to the Dutch East Indies Company, the VOC.

From there I move to Sidney Mintz and his mid-1980s classic historical anthropology of sucrose. A lot of the commodity literature has a strong global component, and look at the different power relations that become subsumed in commodity production and

commerce, and commodity connections and consumption patterns. A long-term perspective opens students to larger social and political commodity relations, for example, behind the birth of capitalism and the roles of slavery and colonialism in those still controverted processes.

Elisabet: How do you use Mintz' idea of "food drugs" in your course?

Paul: In my undergraduate commodities course, called "Empire of Goods," I periodize, to simplify, trade goods as "Colonial," "Capitalist" "Industrial, and "Global" goods—in an overlapping succession since the 15th century.

The first part of the course though is about cacao and colonial products generally. Cacao became an early Spanish commodity in the 16th century following the conquest of Mexico. In fact, cacao beans really had been a major indigenous Mesoamerica market good, one of the most vital inter-regional trade commodities in the Aztec Empire, as well as the pre-Aztec realm. Cacao becomes chocolate, first as a luxury beverage, through Spanish imperialism, into, over time, a larger European good. So, I use the category "colonial good." Cacao was an exemplary colonial good: so many of its characteristics fit it into a mercantilist mold, its coercive colonial labor systems, its aristocratic Catholicized consumption forms when chocolate was a drink, before its modern industrialization as a hard product and candy by the 19th century.

The second part is about "capitalist goods," or the transition to capitalism. Here is where I turn to Mintz and his category of "drugfoods." I like Sweetness and Power pedagogically because it is a process-oriented book. But it's difficult for undergraduate students! It's not the best organized text in the world, but it's rich with ideas and implications. Using Mintz can begin to tease out questions like: why was sugar a crucial good in the creation of capitalist relationships? Not just with plantation slavery in the Caribbean, but also with the related creation of working-class consumption, the larger shift in political economy in Britain, in the 18th and 19th century from mercantilist- towards free trade capitalism and empire. It's a transitional

reading between colonialism and industrialism, over two centuries, to see how Atlantic capitalism emerges along with its products like sugar, tea, coffee. I also lecture about other products that are instrumental or part of the transition to capitalism on a global scale—including, haha, again, Peruvian guano!

And then the third part of the course, I call it "industrialism" where I deal with products that have an industrial character or make-up to them. They're more homogenous and mechanical in production. They are for mass consumption markets. There's a full dislocation between their origin and their uses. The example that I use for that is about bananas. Bananas, even though an agrarian or botanic product are heavily industrialized, a lot of chemicals, mass scale production. Every banana is monocultured. The best book to use is John Soluri's environmentallabor history, Banana Cultures, which illustrates the late 19th-century industrial good and market connection between the growing mass-market US and Honduras, a so-called "Banana Republic."

Elisabet: How do you approach the history of illicit drugs in your teaching?

Paul: Basically, it's also about a long-term process as well of changing political-economy regimes. I use books, that explore these shifting historical processes in detail. One of the books that I use to explore illicit drugs or the making of illicit drugs would be my own, Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug, which is a long-term history about Peru and its relationships to shifting global commodity chains in Europe, United States, and even SE Asia. First, is the making of an actual commodity out of cocaine during the 19th century. Cocaine was discovered in 1860, and has a long relationship with indigenous Andean coca leaf, a different if related thread of the narrative. But in the early 20th century, cocaine then becomes increasingly marginalized as a commodity. And by the 1940s, I argue in my research, cocaine becomes transformed into a fully illicit drug. From there grew these huge networks of illicit cocaine, which are what we see today in the global drugs trade from Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia.

Elisabet Does the illicit character of cocaine influence the way you teach these processes?

Paul: Yes, I think so. I mean, you have to unpack illicitness, trying to find a cogent historical analysis of why certain commodities become illicit commodities and how does the illicitness affect the commodity and cultural usage. In the first instance, it was useful to begin grasping drugs as ordinary commodities. And a lot of drug studies have done that. It's not something new. When you treat drugs as a commodity, you kind of take away a lot the obfuscation or sensationalism in how they're dealt with in the media, not to mention how they are treated by states and in politics.

So, it's an excellent first step in sort of desensationalizing and perhaps objectifying as much as possible the study of drugs. But I don't think that goes far enough, because it becomes very simple to just say, drugs are commodities just like other commodities. They're not. Drugs are different from other commodities because they contain chemicals that can directly change consciousness And the changing of consciousness itself has powerful religious, medical, social, all kinds of

symbolic connotations. Those implications were classically dealt with by anthropologists, in ethnobotany, but I think they're vital to reinscribe into the historical study of drugs.

Elisabet: What do students find challenging or what do they like, about these courses?

Paul: Students like history courses that relate to things that they know about and that they have an intrinsic stake in. So, drugs or even everyday commodities can be easily relatable to issues that they're thinking about or experiencing. And for one reason or another, student populations know an awful lot about drugs! Drugs are intriguing in so many ways. They're absolutely everywhere in film and television drama now, with all taboos falling. Some students suffered through anti-drug propaganda in school before university, and want to recover from that. Some of them have had personal experiences with drugs, lots of drugs, certainly cannabis and alcohol, or hallucinogens like Ecstasy, or know people who are hit by the opioid problems in the United States. So, it shows you can actually study and learn a whole new way of historical thinking about something you already know superficially in the culture

BOOKS Commonly Used in Undergraduate Drug and Commodity History Courses *Drugs*:

Campos, Isaac (2012) Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs. University of North Carolina Press.

Gootenberg, Paul (2008) Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug. University of North Carolina Press.

Farber, David (2019) Crack: Rock Cocaine, Street Capitalism, and the Decade of Greed. Cambridge University Press.

Schivelbusch, Wolfgang (1992) Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, Intoxicants. Vintage Books.

Additional Readings:

Bourgois, Philippe (1995) In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio. Cambridge University Press. Campbell, Howard (2009) Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez. University of Texas Press.

Courtwright, David (2001) Forces of Habit: Drugs & Making of the Modern World. Harvard University Press.

Lamb, F. Bruce (1993) Wizard of the Upper Amazon: The Story of Manuel Córdova-Ríos. N. Atlantic Books.

Stevens, Jay (1988) Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream. Perennial.

Commodities:

Coe, Sophie and Michael (1993) *The True History of Chocolate*. Thames & Hudson. Mintz, Sidney W. (1985) *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Penguin.

Soluri, John (2005) Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Agrarian Change in Honduras and the United States. Univ. of Texas Press.

Topik, Steven, Carlos Marichal, Zephyr Frank (eds.) (2006) From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000. Duke University Press.

Graduate Commodities Seminar (2018):

Apter, Andrew (2005) The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria. University of Chicago Press.

Beckert, Sven (2014) Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism. Knopf.

Brook, Timothy (2008) Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World. Bloomsbury.

Carney, Judith (2001) Black Rice: African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas. Harvard University Press.

Cronin, William (1991) Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West. Norton.

Elmore, Bartow J. (2015) Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism. Norton.

Gaytán, Marie Sarita (2014) Tequila! Distilling the Spirit of Mexico. Stanford University Press.

Gootenberg, Paul (2008) Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug. University of North Carolina Press.

Ives, Sarah (2017) Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea. Duke University Press.

Norton, Marcy. (2010) Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World. Cornell University Press.

Mintz, Sidney W. (1985) Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History. Penguin.

Soluri, John (2005) Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States. University of Texas Press.



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*All photos provided by the author.

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