Substance and seduction

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Substance and seduction: Ingested commodities in early modern Mesoamerica

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10 b&w illustrations, 5 b&w maps, and 3 b&w charts/graphs

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This edited volume is the result of a double session held at the American Society for Ethnohistory in Indianapolis in 2014 on ingested commodities that were used by Mesoamerican peoples in Early Modern times. The concept “ingested commodities” refers to all substances taken into the body, whether food, drink, or drug. As the editors declare, the objective is not to represent every substance, but non-subsistence ingestibles that became colonial commodities (p. 11). Some of them might be generally labeled as drugs, due to their mind-altering properties (a variety of alcoholic beverages) or even their hallucinogenic effects (for instance, tobacco, peyote cactus, and *Psilocybe* mushrooms); others equally have psychoactive properties but are mild stimulants, such as cacao; still others, as in the case of sugar, might be considered as foods, although not as dietary staples.

The approach adopted is similar to that of Schivelbusch (1993) in explaining the craving of the European elites for exotic spices, stimulants, and intoxicants from the Middle Ages to the 19th century, and the deep impact of this habit in Europe, since increasing demand for those products encouraged the search for new trade routes. However, if Schivelbusch’s work was centered on the Western culture, the current volume places “*these substances in dialogue with one another and in looking outward from colonial Mesoamerica to the Atlantic World and to the present*” (p. 5).

Attention is not paid to the physiological effects of these substances on the consumers. Rather than these qualities, it is their social life that is being emphasized (p. 176). This substantial book aims to set ingested commodities in their historical context on a large scale: the colonial encounters that transformed the Atlantic World from the 16th century onward. Early modern societies on both sides of the Atlantic became attracted to, or seduced by, as is indicated in the title, new exotic products which, as a result, were highly demanded. By examining their patterns of consumption, production, and circulation, the aim is to illustrate how cultural contact and trade between America, Europe, and Africa contributed to the social transformations derived from the dynamics of the colonial interactions. Therefore, the main theme of the book is how ingested commodities contributed to shape the Modern World through consumption practices.

The speakers at the Indianapolis meeting, who are the authors of the six chapters of the volume, tackled this theme through selected case studies on hallucinogenic plant sources (Chapter 1), alcohol (Chapters 2, 5, and 6),

chocolate (Chapter 3), tobacco (Chapter 4), and sugar (Chapter 6). A foreword and an afterword are provided by two invited commentators Marcy Norton and Carla D. Martin, the reputed scholars who have extensively published articles on tobacco and chocolate from a historical perspective. Their contributions provide a magnificent overall assessment of the volume.

From the author’s point of view, what makes this book particularly interesting is the analysis of the symbolic meaning of the ingested commodities and more specifically the cultural transformations they underwent as a result of the colonial encounters. This seems quite obvious in the case of new substances that were introduced in Mesoamerica, such as sugar. But even if the actors, the consumption events, or the substances themselves remained relatively the same, there are significant differences in relation to pre-Columbian times. This comes as no surprise, since the control over the use of traditional substances was the cause of concern for colonial authorities: they were viewed with suspicion not only due to their role in the construction of the indigenous identity, but, what was more perilous, also due to their presence in religious rituals. Therefore, a wide range of issues (social, political, economic, and religious) are presented in this book in a complex scenario that was unfolded during the period between the Medieval World and the birth of the Modern Era.

This book is an essential reading for those concerned with the political economy of the Modern World. Furthermore, this volume should be of great interest to scholars of colonial studies and anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and economists working on the development of modern capitalism.

REFERENCE

Schivelbusch, W. (1993). *Tastes of paradise: A social history of spices, stimulants, and intoxicants*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

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