the changing profession

Commodity Histories

BRUCE ROBBINS

ONE STRIKING CHARACTERISTIC OF COMMODITY HISTORIES, A SUDDENLY UBIQUITOUS GENRE OF POPULAR NONFICTION, IS A CERTAIN OVERKILL in their subtitles. A representative sample might include, say, *Corn and Capitalism: How a Botanical Bastard Grew to Global Dominance* (Warman), *Tobacco: A Cultural History of How an Exotic Plant Seduced Civilization* (Gately), *The Potato: How the Humble Spud Rescued the Western World* (Zuckerman), *The World of Caffeine: The Science and Culture of the World's Most Popular Drug* (Weinberg and Bealer), *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* (Kurlansky), and *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color That Changed the World* (Garfield). Only slightly less over-the-top than the "changed the world" clause, which also appears in recent histories of vanilla, house cats, Ping-Pong balls, dishwashing liquid, and pocket lint, is the vogue for two-word titles in which an adjective, usually a commodity-identifying color, is paired with the most coveted of precious metals. Some examples are *Blue Gold* (water [Barlow and Clarke]), *White Gold* (rubber [Yungjohann]), *Black Gold* (oil [Woodward]), and *Green Gold* (tea and marijuana—two books [Bennet; Macfarlane and Macfarlane]).[1] Such titles suggest that all these commodities, even the humblest, have the power to get continents discovered, dynasties toppled, mountains moved. We take some of these commodities for granted, but all of them have changed the world.

Changing the world in the strong sense that Marx contrasted with merely interpreting it—changing the configuration of class and global power—is arguably more demanding than inventing a new flavor or cleaning fluid, impressive as those accomplishments are. The overreaching in these titles might be thought of, therefore, as a humorous reenactment of what Marx called the fetishism of the commodity: ascribing to economically valued objects powers they do not possess. But state-of-the-art academic opinion these days displays some uncertainty about what it means to fetishize a commodity, or for that matter to defetishize one.[2] Commodity fetishism, Thomas Richards writes, "is only an analogy, and Marx does not mean to imply that people in market societies venerate objects in the same way that peo-

BRUCE ROBBINS, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, is the author of *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (New York UP, 1999). His current work is about narratives of upward mobility.

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ple once worshipped things as deities" (129). The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, writing of "that god Tea to whom the British were prepared to sacrifice 'everything else,'" recognizes no difference between the two styles of object worship, though his facetiousness—an interesting stylistic parallel to that of the popular histories—makes it hard to be sure.[3] Some functional equivalent of the sacred seems ineradicable from the topic. But how far should this sense of the sacred be allowed to extend? Not all commodities become narratable simply because—as in the case of water—we are shocked that a substance that should be sacrosanct is being treated as a commodity.[4] Richards's point is that commodities "have derived their power from other sources" (129). He doesn't say how much power commodities actually possess if considered from a hypothetically secular perspective or which "other sources" they derive it from. Looking through a commodity to the human relations behind it, what exactly should one see? Capitalism? Class? Culture? The state? After all, what is the right way to describe a commodity?

These remain live questions. My aim here is to apply them to both popular and academic writing about commodities. The two categories flourish side by side and, though often different, sometimes intriguingly overlap.

The popular histories are themselves commodities. Their flagrant after-the-colon excesses, which loudly advertise both the commodity and the book about the commodity, might be considered a sly acknowledgment that their fate depends on their ability to compete in the market. For this reason and others, one would not expect them to be strongly critical of the market.[5] At least in the humanities, academic texts (perhaps because they are sold in a protected niche market) tend on the contrary to assume a critical stance toward commodities. Sidney Mintz, the anthropologist ancestor of commodity history, demonstrated in his *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985) how the British working-class habit of drinking sweetened tea was linked to the institution of slavery in the Caribbean, where the sugar was produced, and that neither the Caribbean slaves nor the British workers showed awareness of the link.[6] His academic successors have rarely achieved the same balance of sympathy between two such distant collectivities, but they have repeatedly forced consumers to pay attention to producers. Steven Topik, writing about coffee, strikes the characteristic note: "strong backs and sweat in poor countries have produced it for the delicate china and refined palates of rich countries" (37). Piya Chatterjee's *A Time for Tea* begins with a scene in which the author shows pictures of women gathering tea, taken from the covers of tea packets sold in the United States, to two Indian women who actually pick tea and who giggle derisively at how the sorry state of their hands, for example, doesn't make it into the idealized, exotic image.

Popular versions of commodity narrative tend to leave out anything that might make the consumer feel guilty. If they refer to the producers at all, they, like the tea packets, carefully omit any suggestion of work-related suffering or deformity.[7] Indeed, much of what the popular narratives say would not be out of place as an advertising supplement attached to the commodity's packaging. Many titles, like Michael J. Vickers's *Ivory: A History and Collector's Guide*, are intended to enhance the connoisseur's pleasure in expert acquisition.[8] Among the reasons for the popularity of these books must be counted the extra gusto an exotic place of origin and a premodern pedigree—sacred if possible—can confer on an item of consumption. It adds value to remind a European smoker, however distant from religious observance, that Mayans considered tobacco "to be not only a form of pleasure, but also a ritual of immense significance" (Gately 11). In the same effort to embellish the everyday, *The World of Caffeine* notes, "With every cup of coffee you drink, you partake of one of

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the great mysteries of cultural history" (Weinberg and Bealer 3). In books about foods, which make up a substantial proportion of the genre, the inclusion of recipes offers the reader a satisfying and unthreatening outlet. The information typically delivered about these commodities would not be inappropriate if offered to someone taking up a job in the relevant business or thinking of investing in it.

These books do not merely take the existence of global capitalism for granted. They also tend to make a forceful argument on capitalism's behalf. One central story line might be described as commodity democratization. You begin with a commodity like chocolate or coffee or tobacco that when first imported into Europe was restricted to courtly or aristocratic circles by its price and scarcity or because its circulation was blocked by other antiquated and elitist vestiges of traditional society. Then you tell the story of how this protagonist, usually an underdog, though touched with a mysterious hint of natural distinction, spread across the social spectrum, dropping dramatically in price as taxes and prohibitions were lifted and becoming triumphantly accessible to the eager masses. In a recent history of chocolate, for example, the trajectory leads from the first chapter title, "The Tree of the Food of the Gods," to the last chapter title, "Chocolate for the Masses"(Coe and Coe).[9] The villains of this narrative, numerous and colorful though also bumbling and ineffectual, are the kings, priests, moralists, and would-be experts who declaimed quaintly against the new products, whether in the name of national tradition (beer or wine against coffee or tea), out of fiscal greed, or in fear of the dire effects on public health and moral apocalypse sure to follow. With rare national exceptions, these enemies of the consumer are always vanquished. The commodity always arrives at its proper, mass destination.

This is effective capitalist propaganda. What a wondrous system this is, you are told, that has brought to your doorstep or breakfast table all these things you never would have known existed, yet things without which you would not, you suddenly realize, be yourself. With so much resistance to overcome from superstitious, self-interested, and intrusive authorities, you must be grateful that the commodity, or the system for which it stands, had an intrinsic power to overcome all obstacles of distance and dogma.

The vanquishing of resistance to the commodity, which is the essential event in most of these narratives (even oil had to overcome entrenched loyalty to coal), is made comprehensible by the channeling of the system's enormous scope and power into a personification. In effect, each commodity takes its turn as the star of capitalism's story. One chapter title speaks for many: "Chocolate Conquers Europe" (Coe and Coe 127).[10] Over and over, Europe is invaded, penetrated, conquered, rescued, seduced, and dominated. Actual scenes of seduction, a "first time" from which there is no going back, repeatedly accompany the birth of European desire—that is, the birth of demand. However jokingly, the authors attribute to their chosen commodities an exaggerated, mysterious, almost godlike power. In this sense the commodity histories invite comparison with the "great man" stories of corporate founders like John D. Rockefeller and Minor Keith.[11] In the rites of capitalist self-celebration, individual commodities have certainly not replaced great individuals.[12] But the commodities now seem to be doing some of the same narrative work and indeed have taken over some of the impetuous, all-conquering character type once attributed to tycoons and discoverers.[13] The advantage is clear. It's harder to blame a commodity.

Rather than present the commodity as a self-sufficient protagonist, academic narratives largely focus on the concealed social relations behind it. Mintz writes that the creation of "a radically new diet cannot possibly be explained by reference to . . . some single, narrowly defined 'cause'" (178–79).[14] Capitalism, the cause

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to which he quietly attributes both slavery and the new working-class diet, can scarcely be defined as single or narrow.[15] Tempting as it is, however, this antithesis between academic and popular versions doesn't quite work. For one thing, reattaching the lives of the producers to the commodity they produce is by no means a guarantee that the commodity will be criticized or shorn of its power. The newest scholarship on coffee, as in William Clarence-Smith and Steven Topik, emphasizes "the extent of the freedom of action enjoyed by local producers" (4) and in many cases the surprisingly positive value for women and children of participating in the process. "Smallholder agency has thus become the new watchword, contrasting with earlier visions of backwardness, repression, and victimization" (15). "Coffee was not an all-powerful master that demanded that its subjects follow a specific life-style and mindset" (385). Yet coffee remains a powerful metaphor for a set of social relations, and the authors remain a bit in awe of it: "The cup of coffee you sip at the breakfast table, desk, or café comes from far away. . . . For five hundred years coffee has been grown in tropical countries for consumption in temperate regions, linking peoples of different lands and continents by trade, investment, immigration, conquest, and cultural and religious diffusion. There is a world of history in your cup" (1). You can understand why a disclaimer appears, a page later, against any intention of "cash[ing] in on the Starbucks Revolution." The familiar-sounding line about a world of history in your cup would make passable Starbucks advertising copy. It all depends on what particular history is understood to fill that cup.

William Cobbett, touring Ireland in the early nineteenth century, blamed the poverty and misery he saw on the potato. In another state-of-the-art expression of commodity consciousness in the academy, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt see the materialists who make such arguments as worshipping their own deities. "Just as the Host, by *being* rather than *meaning* the literal presence of Christ's body and blood, is placed beyond artistic representation, the potato conducts us to the nineteenth-century materialists' beyond, where the Real is the physical ground of our existence, as harsh and unremitting in its determinism as it is generally indifferent to constructions of its import" (112–13). But if the potato can be considered a fetish for the materialists, one might say that culture itself can be a fetish for the academics. "When English people refused to eat potato stews because they were 'swill'—not human food—. . . it seems extremely likely that they were increasing their hunger. But it is also possible that they remained hungry, as they claimed they did, even when they grudgingly ate such alternatives to bread" (125). If culture tells us we are still hungry after a meal of potatoes, then perhaps, according to academic common sense, we will still be hungry. Culture, like religion, can work miracles.

The idea that the edifice of globalization might be built on nothing firmer than subjectivity gets a chillier reception from the popular historians. They do not shy away from cultural explanation—on the contrary—but they tend to mix cultural and material factors freely.[16] Larry Zuckerman's popular history of the potato reminds the reader that though "entire populations [were ready] to risk starvation rather than grow a vegetable," this culturally defined hunger did not win out or indeed survive (xiv). The baking of bread, Zuckerman says, is "one of life's great miracles," whereas boiling potatoes "demanded no skill, possessed no mystery, no richness, no link to the past." Nonetheless, traditionalists and doubters ended up assimilating potatoes to their diet. The last line of his book goes, "[H]owever ugly and prosaic the potato might be, hunger is far worse" (271).[17] For Zuckerman, the overcoming of cultural resistance is no less worthy of his respect and attention than the resistance itself. Indeed, it too will become a part of culture. Culture seems to figure here only

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as a provisional summing up of historical experiences, always open to change in the light of new ones. Gallagher and Greenblatt, on the other hand, stop their story short before resistance to the potato has been overcome, as if to freeze culture artificially in a moment of its pure and heroic self-expression.[18]

Yet the academic writers have no monopoly over piety toward culture and cultures. This is one of the oddest features of the popular histories: seemingly uncritical deference to universalizing materialist explanation often goes hand in hand with a degree of respect for non-Western customs that is not merely eccentric but frankly heretical. "Prior to legislation against them," Dominic Streatfeild writes in his history of cocaine, "it was common knowledge that coca and cocaine cured various ailments. . . . Coca chewing keeps the Andes on the go the way coffee keeps the rest of the world on the go" (6).[19] There is nothing on which popular and academic writers are more likely to agree. James Mills notes that cannabis in India, which like tobacco was used by the natives as a hunger suppressant, was only criminalized when the British state, for economic motives, began to crack down on the Indian hemp trade.[20] Jeffrey Knapp notes that while so-called savages were supposed to prefer worthless trinkets, in the case of Elizabethan tobacco "Indian tastes assume a kind of authority" (36).

On the evidence of these books, the authority of non-Western taste is a subject on which popular and academic opinion have converged.[21] Instead of the civilizational self-flattery one might have expected, the commodity histories again and again offer occasions for an energetic relativizing of Western civilization.[22] Streatfeild underlines the parallel between coca and tobacco: "Admittedly, the idea of putting dried leaves in your mouth and adding caustic compounds to break them down is kind of left-field, but then the Indians who came up with it are cousins of the jokers who decided it would be a neat idea to put dried leaves in their mouths and set fire to them. They have a history of slightly off-the-wall uses for plants" (6). And he mocks those gringos who disembark in South America demanding an end to coca chewing as comparable to a foreigner in England who suggests everyone stop drinking tea (7). You are made to feel the utter artificiality of, say, the line between substances like cannabis or cocaine, which the West considers criminal and therefore regulates yet which are incomprehensibly not seen as evil in the areas where they are grown, and substances like chocolate and coffee, which no one today would consider criminalizing—but which were criminalized in the past, with the full support of many or most of the West's religious and scientific authorities.

As I've noted, the commodity histories devote much attention to these authorities, who are repeatedly shown to have had no clue about the genuine properties or social effects of what they were trying to prohibit or regulate. In this light, "Western culture" reveals itself as a pageant of human silliness. The other side of the wonderfully refreshing spectacle of self-anthropologization thus offered is a strong suggestion that nothing much has changed—that today's efforts to keep nicotine out of the lungs of children, for example, are continuous with priestly warnings against coffee, government crackdowns on chocolate, the puritanism of earlier temperance and prohibition movements, or the nationalism behind conspicuous acts of nonconsumption like the Boston Tea Party. Control, censorship, regulation: these targets appear so regularly as to seem, perhaps, the whole point of the exercise. By flattering consumer desire as the expression of true, anarchic democracy on the global scale, in other words, the narrative can be seen as inviting the reader-consumer to intervene on behalf of the commodity-protagonist (who is all the more irresistible for needing a bit of assistance) in an effort to overthrow regulation once and for all.[23]

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Less often but more intriguingly, the reader is also invited to join that regulation, seen now as collective self-protection against both measureless demand and the capital that flows through that demand. *The World of Caffeine* opens on a note of alarmism that is not merely self-serving:

> Caffeine, by any measure, is the world's most popular drug, easily surpassing nicotine and alcohol. Caffeine is the only addictive psychoactive substance that has overcome resistance and disapproval around the world to the extent that it is freely available almost everywhere, unregulated, sold without license, offered over the counter in tablet and capsule form, and even added to beverages intended for children. (Weinberg and Bealer xi)

Kurlansky's "biography" of the cod, exceptional in the attention it pays to the fishermen or producers, allows neither the producers nor the consumers any absolute moral rights or epistemological privileges. The Gloucester fishermen blithely and incorrectly blame the cod's disappearance on the fishermen of other nations. Left to their own devices, fishermen and consumers would conspire to render the cod extinct. It follows, then, that the state was right to step in and close the fishing grounds. Barbara Freese's *Coal: A Human History* takes King Edward I's banning of coal in 1306, the opening scene of the book, as an enlightened precedent for today's antipollution laws.

Popular commodity histories are interesting, among other reasons, as answers to the question of how much sense ordinary Americans are making of the United States' economic ties with the rest of the world. Hearing in the media of Toyotas smashed by Detroit autoworkers and of countries (rather than corporations) blamed for "stealing American jobs," one is sometimes tempted to say: not much. The commodity histories offer a somewhat more encouraging picture. They display a necessary impulse toward cultural relativism, and at their best they counterbalance it with an equally necessary impulse toward state regulation, thus helping to rechannel a national solidarity that might otherwise be painfully misdirected. Regulation also and increasingly exists on the transnational scale, where national and transnational loyalties can therefore mingle.

More reliable support for regulation might have been expected from academic writing, which often exposes how consumer demand has been at least partially constructed by state policies and thus that it could be constructed differently. If such support has not always been forthcoming, one reason is perhaps a commitment to culture that could arguably be described, in the humanities at least, as fetishistic. How else to explain an instinctive antistatism that translates legitimate demands for scrutiny and accountability into complaints about the extension of surveillance? As the antisweatshop movement has shown, however, the particularity of culture can also become a source of unpredictable political strength. The secret of which commodities get their histories written and which do not lies in the everyday experience of the average book buyer. That experience privileges certain commodities over others: it's hard to imagine a best-seller about kapoc or karaya gum—tropical imports used, respectively, in upholstery and colostomy bags—or about annatto seed, balsam, or camphor. The formula works only because, in the cases of cod, corn, coal, and coffee, objective economic dependence is supplemented by an instant and indisputable tug on the attention, and this depends in turn on a culturally specific mix: norms of intimacy and violation, empowered ambitions to refashion the self, susceptibility to guilt and renunciation, and so on. New and more politically dynamic syntheses of these volatile elements seem possible. Perhaps this is where a contribution can be solicited from academic writers, who have shown themselves more conscious that the history of the

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commodity is the history of global injustice but who can always be asked for more effort in translating this consciousness into popular narratives and popular movements.

Notes

[1] A diabolical submotif is also worth noting: Stewart Lee Allen's *The Devil's Cup: Coffee, the Driving Force in History* and Leo Drollas and Jon Greenman's *Oil: The Devil's Gold*.

[2] I use here a restricted definition of *commodity*: I mean not objects in themselves (as in the work of Bill Brown) or everything that can be bought and sold (including, say, currencies and futures options) but only physical substances that are bought and sold.

[3] Sahlins is arguing against a functionalist interpretation of the European demand for tea, whose "rituals were touted in the eighteenth century as domesticating and its virtues as non-intoxicating, properties that contrasted with its more masculine rivals for popular consumption: beer, ale and gin. One readily grasps the function of tea as delivering a docile and effective working class into the maws of the developing capitalism. But if the spread of the tea habit were to be studied seriously," Sahlins says drily, one must attend to the native cosmology of the Europeans. The European desire for tea is just as much a matter of religion and ritual as the Hawaiian desire for European manufactures. Fetishism in the strong, original sense—the worship of an artifact as a deity—is just as characteristic of the West as of the non-West. It's turtles of religion all the way down. Hence, the project of defetishization no longer makes sense—unless Sahlins exemplifies a revised, self-limiting version of it.

[4] Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke's *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop the Corporate Theft of the World's Water* begins in 2000, when the World Bank and large corporations meeting at The Hague decided that water would be "treated like any other tradable good" (xiii). The book proposes "that the Earth's fresh water belongs to the Earth and all species, and therefore must not be treated as a private commodity" (xvii). See also Shiva.

[5] The enormous number of texts from which I have chosen here is suggested by an anecdote: in his book *Oranges*, which probably influenced popular commodity writing, John McPhee mentions finding six thousand books devoted to citrus in the library of the University of Florida's Citrus Experiment Station.

[6] Compare the modesty of his subtitle: "The *Place* of Sugar in Modern History." Other influential early texts include Braudel (*Structures* and *Wheels*) and Schivelbusch, exceptional in their popular as well as academic appeal.

[7] The "Anatomy of an Industry" series put out by the New Press, a trade publisher, seems to be an exception. *The Coffee Book: Anatomy of an Industry from Crop to Last Drop*, by Gregory Dicum and Nina Luttinger, offers a final chapter called "Conscious Coffee" that again brings the scene of production into the spotlight: "The experience of enjoying a leisurely cup of fragrant java over a Sunday morning newspaper seems to belong in a different universe from the experience of picking your ten-thousandth red coffee cherry, throwing it into a heavy sack with the rest as the tropical sun beats down on your back and you wheeze with pesticide-scarred lungs. Yet, they're part of the same product" (165). See also Parker-Pope. Mark Kurlansky's *Cod* is another exception.

[8] See also Saffron, on caviar.

[9] On chocolate, see also Clarence-Smith; Szogyi.

[10] One thing to note is the element of comic reversal. The actual vectors of power linking the places these products come from and the places where they are consumed are the opposite of the "chocolate conquers Europe" model. The joke seems to get its force in part from this man-bites-dog quality: in other words, from making possible a sudden and not unpleasant forgetting, or a combination of forgetting and remembering, that the shoe of global dominance is actually on the other foot.

[11] Examples include Yergin; Wagner. On oil, note the contrast between Yergin and the "anatomy of an industry" format in Yeomans.

[12] A hybrid of the two forms is Simon Garfield's *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color That Changed the World*. The history of the color mauve in fact (almost) belongs to a much more interesting variant, centered neither on the commodity nor on great men but (one way in which these stories are not told) on chains of commodities. Gaslight in nineteenth-century London produced huge quantities of coal tar, which was seen as poisonous waste until chemists like William Perkin began to find uses for it: waterproofing for the first raincoat, then dyes like mauve—which fed back into the rapidly growing textile industry. The textile industry gave rise to cottonseed oil, in which the English eventually decided to deep-fry sliced potatoes to accompany fried fish. And so on.

[13] There is perhaps an occult fit between capitalism in its current stage, whatever that is, and its embodiment in a series of unintimidating, apparently frivolous commodities whose biographers frequently feel impelled to defend the enterprise of writing about them at all.

[14] The new commodity history in the academy tends to locate agency neither in commodities nor in great men, nor for that matter in systems like capitalism or imperialism, but in an unpredictable multiplicity of factors. A good example is Striffler and Moberg's *Banana Wars*. The book argues that even the most powerful and infamous representatives of foreign capital, like United Fruit Company, could rarely simply dictate what went on. Among the factors cited as putting United Fruit on

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the defensive are plant pathogens, feisty labor unions, resistant peasants, opportunistic local politicians, anxious Wall Street investors, and North American antitrust courts (Wells 319). Much the same multifactor emphasis can be found in Ahluwalia, Ashcroft, and Knight; Clarence-Smith and Topik.

[15] Mintz writes, "The substances transformed by British capitalism from upper-class luxuries into working-class necessities are of a certain type. Like alcohol or tobacco, they provide respite from reality, and deaden hunger pangs. Like coffee or chocolate or tea, they provide stimulus to greater effort without providing nutrition. Like sugar they provide calories, while increasing the attractiveness of these other substances when combined with them. There was no conspiracy at work to wreck the nutrition of the British working class, to turn them into addicts, or to ruin their teeth. But the ever-rising consumption of sugar was an artifact of intraclass struggles for profit—struggles that eventuated in a world-market solution for drug foods, as industrial capitalism cut its protectionist losses and expanded a mass market to satisfy proletarian consumers once regarded as sinful or indolent" (186).

[16] The chemical and biological properties of commodities are not ignored by academic historians, who sometimes complain about excesses of culturalism (see Topik and Wells). But popular histories tend to make larger, even miraculous, claims for them. Martin Booth: "In short, society is undermined—some would say underpinned—by opium" (xii). Kurlansky in *Cod* describes the salting of cod in the Middle Ages as "a miracle comparable to the discovery of the fast-freezing process in the twentieth century" (22). It explains transoceanic exploration: "The Basques, unlike the Vikings, had salt, and because fish that was salted before drying lasted longer, the Basques could travel even farther than the Vikings" (21–22). Cod also explains the rise of New England, which it "lifted . . . from a distant colony of starving settlers to an international commercial power" (78). Yet no explanation is given for why the English of various regions should accept certain fish and reject others for their fish and chips. Some cultural mysteries remain unviolated.

[17] Like a complex human character, the commodity in popular narratives tends to combine elements of material and cultural explanation. Zuckerman's reasons for resistance to the potato, for example, include sociocultural ones. Potatoes were pushed onto a reluctant population from above. The rich "didn't advertise it as a worthy food, only as a substitute for bread. The king did not announce that his household would eat potatoes instead of bread" (65). "Potatoes were hardship fare, the food of misery" (67). His reasons include cultural-biological ones: "The potato's more infamous siblings were poisons, narcotics, and witches' spells" (12). It was thus associated with sexuality and ill health. Modern science was to confirm some of the prejudices by finding poisons in the potato as well as in its botanical kin and using them medicinally.

[18] The freezing of culture in a moment of pure and heroic self-expression is one possible description of what the humanities do for a living. One finds something similar in Jeffrey Knapp's essay on Elizabethan tobacco. Knapp attributes the triumph of "divine" tobacco, even at a time when the Spanish monopoly meant that English smokers were enriching the coffers of the enemy, to the paradoxical fact that it was "the ultimate superfluity" (43). Advocates for tobacco like Beaumont, Knapp says, argued that "with less persuasive claims to inherent value than gold, tobacco bespeaks the mind's power to create value, and so continually alerts the English mind . . . to its own abilities" (29). This nod to the Romantic imagination deepens into a bow: "Tobacco was supposed to dramatize that . . . something like what we would now call ideology was true power. While the Spanish enslaved themselves to gold, tobacco taught the English to limit their ambitions to nothing—or, at least, to nothing but smoke" (30). When Knapp speaks of tobacco's "paradoxical combination of triviality and power"(27)—a phrase that would apply to most of these commodities—he is also pointing to triviality as power, which is to say an allegory of vocation of the literary critic, devoted to showing the miraculous power of a subject matter, literature, that is forever in danger of being dismissed as trivial. Contrast this with Iain Gately's more popular account of tobacco's "strange compulsion, which causes experiment to lead to slavery" (2). Gately makes much of his product's associations with divinity, but he also speaks at length of tobacco's utility as an insecticide, a medicine, and a hunger suppressant. For him, as for other popular writers, there appears to be no need to argue for cultural factors at the expense of material, biological, functionalist ones.

[19] The book's first scene shows the author's experiment with chewing coca leaves in the native fashion. At first he feels nothing. "Could 40 centuries of South American Indians really be wrong?" (ix). One paragraph later his tongue is numb, and other, pleasanter effects follow. The authority of native experience is confirmed.

[20] In other words, the criminality of cannabis resulted not from its inherent properties as a substance but from the policies of the British state. "In India, colonial officials began to associate cannabis with criminality at about the same time that they began trying to tax the trade in Indian hemp products more efficiently. Once a product becomes the subject of a state levy, and once the traditional producers and suppliers of that article act to protect their profits by evading that levy, that product and those traders become suspicious to administrators seeking to maximize the state's revenues. Cannabis assumed an air of illegality because the colonial state in India imposed duties on it and branded as criminal all who sought to preserve their income from trade in the substance by trying to dodge payment of the duties" (218). Mills notes that the British didn't use cannabis for medicinal or recreational purposes for something like

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two hundred years despite knowing a great deal about its properties—as this book shows, much of the knowledge was more or less accurate. Lack of demand should perhaps be more of an issue for Mills than it is.

[21] Academic and popular versions share, e.g., a tendency to conflate physiological addiction with metaphoric (socioeconomic) addiction. See Goodman (academic, on tobacco) and Moxham (popular, on tea).

[22] The idea that native tastes assumed "authority" for European consumers makes the circulation of commodities into a sort of dog-that-didn't-bark argument against cultural interpretations of racism. After all, despite strongly held beliefs held about "savages," there was little if any prolonged contempt or disgust for the substances they used. This is a sense in which the indisputable racism of European culture did not appear to matter, and we can be at least moderately glad that it did not.

[23] By their distinctive "half-facetious" tone, these narratives have hinted all along that the commodities may not be all-powerful. The phrase is Gallagher and Greenblatt's (124), but it can be compared with any number of others from the popular books. For an explicit defense of commodity-based culture against government regulation, see Daniel.

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