

Initiative for Historical Social Sciences Meeting Evaluation

Can Ersoy

The theme for the first meeting of the Initiative for Historical Social Sciences was Paul Gootenberg's article on Peruvian pharmacist Alfred Bignon and the "forgotten" science of cocaine in late nineteenth century Peru. The article provides a good example of historical work, which employs sociological conceptual tools. Coupled with a wide array of questions from participants, Gootenberg's study presented a fertile ground for a generalized discussion on cooperation among the disciplines of sociology and history.

Gootenberg relates the history of cocaine science through the story of Alfred Bignon, who was a member of a clique of nationalist medical scientists in late nineteenth century Lima. Bignon's main achievement was inventing a novel and economical method for producing cocaine from fresh coca leaves, a process, which increased the commercial possibilities of coca by transforming it into a modern commodity – one on which Peru would have a monopoly. Within the context of rising European and American interest in cocaine the medical scientists of Peru not only regarded cocaine as a lucrative commodity but as a national scientific project that would highlight the achievements of Peruvian pharmacology. Given the deep cultural division between the ruling urban elites and the coca-using *sierran* Indian majority, medical science was one of the rare avenues for a nationalist recuperation of coca in Peru.

However, instead of being celebrated as a nationalist scientific hero Bignon and his method of producing cocaine had been mostly forgotten by the end of the century.

Gootenberg explains this shift in terms of competing European interests in cocaine and

Bignon's own life experience. The fate of cocaine as a global commodity was determined for most part by competing German and French interests. The German pharmaceutical companies were well aware of the potential of cocaine as a medical substance and were prepared to go to great lengths to dominate the market. Whereas in France the consumer market preferred herbal coca leaf extracts such as *Vin Marinari* over cocaine. Bignon, who was a French immigrant left Peru for France and won a ten year official privilege to import cocaine into France. The German pharmaceutical industry, on the other hand, invented another method for cocaine production that was similar to Bignon's. Given the consumption patterns in both countries and the aggressive investments of German companies Bignon soon abandoned his work on coca and cocaine. The German domination of the market sealed both the fate of cocaine as a global commodity and the nationalist cocaine science of Alfredo Bignon.

The discussion part of the meeting focused on two major points within the article; the concept of global commodity chains and the relationship between center and periphery both of which, are showcased by Bignon's story. Instead of recounting raw data, Gootenberg employs global commodity chains as an interpretative tool. The concept, introduced by Wallerstein, emphasizes the spatial organization of commodities within power chains focusing on social conditions of production and consumption rather than employing abstract notions of supply and demand. Bignon's story can be interpreted as an example of two competing global commodity chains since his fate was inevitably related to this competition. The discussion eventually led to a questioning of the necessity of the global commodity chains in this particular narrative, which was linked to a

questioning of theory in general historical narrative. A closer examination of the article proved that the concept of commodity chains yielded better explanations by exploring ties between agency of actors and structural and economic flows of the period. However Gootenberg was clear to stress that his was a “soft” version of commodity chains, since he did not see this article as a model and the concept itself is used in an interpretative way rather than formulating a hypothesis.

The second point of discussion was the relationship between the center and periphery. Bignon’s Peruvian nationalist science was compared to Freud’s works on cocaine. It was argued that Bignon’s story was affected by his position within the periphery as opposed to Freud’s, whose position within the core contributed to the wide recognition of his works. The major question was the capacity of periphery to control a commodity like cocaine in the face of competing German and French interest. Differing ideas were presented regarding this question. Some of the participants treated the case as a sad story of the inevitable demise of periphery where the economic power of the core would not let a nationalist Peruvian control over cocaine. Whereas other participants drew attention to the possibility of a novel invention coming from the periphery and providing it with a stronger hand against the core. In either case, the asymmetrical power relation between the core and periphery and a division of labor between the two that would rise out of this relationship was recognized. However, the nature of this division of labor and the capacity of periphery to control its own inventions and/or resources is left to interpretation.

In brief, the first meeting of the Initiative for the Historical Social Sciences was very successful in terms of creating a basis for dialogue between sociology and history.

Different readings of the article in the discussion part allowed the participants to communicate across disciplinary boundaries, enabling everyone to better appreciate the nuances of interpretation.