Three

The Economic Culture of Drugs

Today the word “drugs” refers to outlaw commodities, socially harmful and criminal goods that dwell in the underworld of the black market. They are not considered part of the gross national product. Indeed, they are thought to subtract from the total of goods and services produced because drug use prevents consumers from contributing through hard work or by the consumption of legal, wholesome products. Drugs are viewed as an embarrassment to capitalism, a throwback to primitive times before bourgeois ethics and consumption patterns took hold. Drug company CEOs are called “barons” or “lords” as if they were medieval princes and their organizations “clans.” Free trade, which is said to bring great advantages to everyone involved by increasing profits to the most efficient producers and costs to consumers, does not apply to the world of drugs. This is the rare area in which government surveillance and control is demanded to reduce commerce and profits. Drug control is done not through market mechanisms, but through “wars” waged by drug “czars.” But are drugs really such exceptions? Are they economic outcasts with different rules?

The fact is that historically, goods considered drugs, that is, products ingested, smoked, sniffed, or drunk to produce an altered state of being, have been central to exchange and consumption. What has changed is not the commercial and social value of these goods, but the definition of “drug.” New foods introduced from what seem to be exotic lands have historically passed through different phases in their social lives. They often started as drugs that caused pleasant pharmacological effects. As drugs they were seen as both medicines and sacraments of religious rites. That is, they were thought to have both spiritual and physiological effects. They both transported consumers into spiritual states of bodylessness or, conversely, heightened sensuality by serving as aphrodisiacs. They either heightened or dulled senses; but in either case they transported users away from the drudgery of the work-a-day world. (A surprising array of foods were thought to arouse sexual ardor, from the plain potato to the succulent tomato—called the “love
apple.”) Although the introduction of new foods no doubt had these social uses for millennia, only the transportation revolution of the sixteenth century caused these foods to occupy an important place in international trade. As the world economy made them valuable, they were transformed from spiritual or sensual balms into the foundations of vast, secular fortunes.

In the seventeenth century affluent people all over the world began to drink, smoke, and eat exotic plants that came from long distances. Coffee, tea, cocoa, tobacco, and sugar all became popular at roughly the same time. Both European and Asian consumers became addicted to these American, Asian, and African products. For three centuries they constituted the most valuable agricultural goods in world trade. Although today advocates of free trade exempt drugs from the free circulation of goods, in fact the plants that gave birth to the modern world economy were considered drugs. Sometimes, as with coffee and tobacco, they were initially outlawed in consuming countries. But their appeal became so strong that government after government decided that it was better to tax consumers of these delicacies and accept their use, even cultivate it, than to spend large amounts to prevent drug addiction.

However, producers attempted to maintain their natural monopolies since most drug foods were indigenous to a specific place: Arabica coffee to Ethiopia then domesticated in Yemen, cacao to Mexico, coca to the Andes, tea to China, tobacco to the Americas. Non-European originators of these exports such as the Chinese, Ottoman, Aztecs, and Incas attempted to control the trade and to prevent the export of seed or seedlings. They failed when Europeans used the persuasion of trade and the force of warfare to open ports (see reading 3.8). Before long, most of the drug foods were being produced in new, distant parts of the world that Europeans had colonized. Botanical gardens that nurtured exotic seedlings became the advance guard of empire. Colonial empires were built on the foundation of drug trades. So were many domestic bureaucracies and armies. Tariffs on tea, sugar, and tobacco accounted for a significant part of the revenue of numerous seventeenth- and eighteenth-century states. In fact, reliance on taxes on drugs is still one of the main sources of public revenues today. Known as “sin taxes,” charges on tobacco products and alcohol fund our schools and public health programs.

The popularization of drug foods by Europeans often transformed their meanings, uses, and location of production. Tea and coffee gained initial favor in China and the Middle East because their caffeine contributed to the wakefulness necessary for religious rites. Muslim Sufi holymen and Buddhist priests popularized the drinks, which long were closely associated with religious observances (readings 3.2, 3.3). Cacao drinking was re-
stricted to the Aztec theocracy and aristocracy in Mexico (reading 3.1). In Europe, all three beverages became tied to secular uses. Over time their class appeal changed: they began as aristocratic privilege, diffused to bourgeois pleasures, and eventually became mass delights and finally common necessities (reading 3.4). The drugs that began as nourishment for spiritual contemplation became the sustenance of industrial workers. Along that path the way they were consumed also changed. From hot drinks with no sweeteners (the Aztecs added chile to cacao, the Arabs sometimes nutmeg or cardamom to coffee), so many additives were included that the original beverage was hardly discernible.

Once they gained acceptance and began creating fortunes for merchants and state treasuries, most of the drugs became respectable. In areas marginal to world trade, they sometimes served as money. Cacao beans in Central America, tobacco in West Africa, opium in Southwest China, and tea bricks in Siberian Russia were currency. But usually the goal was to transmute them into gold or silver. At first they were foundations of mercantilist empires. The Spanish doted on chocolate because of their dominion over most of Latin America, which had a natural monopoly on cacao until traders later moved it to Africa. The British, who were the first Europeans to become coffee crazed, found tea more to the advantage of their trade plans in China and India (reading 3.9). The French and Americans, oriented to Latin America, became coffee addicts.

These exotic drugs emerged from the outlaw underground to become central parts of the nascent bourgeois life-style in Europe. They went from the stuff of community, such as the tobacco smoked by Native Americans in council meetings or by West Africans in religious ceremonies, to the fuel of individualism. Coffeehouses (which served other drinks as well) served as centers for trade and politicking in Europe. The first newspapers, men’s clubs, and political parties were organized, and revolutions plotted, around tables serving coffee and tea (reading 3.4). Smoking brought together men who created civil society amid the acrid clouds of tobacco (reading 3.7). Indeed, the coffeehouse was the world economy in miniature; it was an international emporium, joining coffee from Java, Yemen, or the Americas, tea from China, sugar and rum from Africa’s Atlantic islands or the Caribbean, and tobacco from North America or Brazil.

The nineteenth century would popularize these goods so much that they lost their revolutionary appeal and their sense of social distinction. Tobacco descended from elegant snuff and fine cigars to vulgar chewing tobacco. Dandy Parisian aristocrats at Versailles who delicately took snuff would not have recognized that this was the same substance that United States baseball players later called “chaw” and spit out on the sidelines or teenagers
smoked furtively in school restrooms. Sugar was debased from extravagant culinary dessert masterpieces to a huge source of working-class calories in beverages to an industrial additive in something so prosaic as, say, ketchup; coffee and tea descended from the elegant salons to became popularized with instant coffee and iced tea in military rations and in cafeterías.

As the drug foods became more popular and respectable, they lost their original histories. Instead of distinguishing the land of their origin, they became central to the cultures of the consuming countries. As agents of the consuming nations transplanted the drug crops around the world, the native countries lost their birthright. When coffee could come from any one of a hundred countries around the globe, what did it have to do with Yemen, where it was first domesticated? Indeed, Yemen’s principal port, Mocca, became associated with chocolate rather than coffee.

In the consuming countries of the north, drugs created culture, social practices. Who could imagine the British without their spot of tea, the French without their café au lait, the Italians without their espresso, or the Americans without their coffee break? The drugs not only helped create national identities in the consuming nations, they also distinguished different sectors of them. Chocolate was considered the drink of women and children while coffee and tobacco were associated with men. Snuff and later cigars were for the elite, chewing tobacco for the commoner. The rich drank their tea poured from Mexican silver teapots into Chinese porcelain cups in an elegant salon; the commoner sipped from a dirty, crude mug lent by a street vendor.

At the same time, in the producing countries the drugs born with so many religious and communitarian meanings became mere commodities. Rather than symbolizing identities, they became a means to make money in order to buy something else or to create capital. As the first international drugs became mass products, new drugs entered the world market. First gaining international demand in the nineteenth century, coca (transformed into cocaine) and opium were initially acceptable mass products. In fact, coca had been chewed for hundreds if not thousands of years in the Andes to dampen hunger and cold and to give energy to workers, much as American workers drank coffee or British laborers tea. The Inca had overseen the coca trade. It was also used in religious rituals. When cocaine was developed in the nineteenth century it was first a pain killer and later an additive in the popular drink Coca-Cola (reading 3.10). Opium, on the other hand, was forbidden by the Chinese emperors after 1729 in an attempt to protect their subjects. It became wildly popular only after British gunboats forced open China’s ports so that the British would have something to sell in China in exchange for all of the Chinese tea the English addiction demanded.
Opium was an engine of growth for the world economy in the nineteenth century as it allowed the British to capitalize Western Europe with Chinese and Indian bullion, much of which had originated in the Americas (reading 3.9).

Only in the twentieth century with the rising tide of prohibition of alcohol consumption did opium and cocaine revert to the outlaw category. The inebriation they created was considered to be more harmful than the virtue of sales. For the first time, a morality campaign defeated the possibility of profit. But this might be a another brief interlude—as we have seen in the past—before the lure of profit outweighs concerns about the social consequences of drug consumption. After all, we are witnessing today struggles between those who would legalize marijuana, as in the Netherlands, restrict it for medical purposes, as a California law did, and those who want to continue criminalization. In the opposite vein, efforts are being made to include tobacco as a drug under Federal Drug Administration authority, rather than an unregulated food as it is today.

In the past, moral scruples were ignored when fortunes were at stake. Catholics were willing to drink a heretic beverage such as Muslim coffee (though they quickly began producing it in supposedly Christian European colonies). French revolutionaries saw no contradiction in drafting the high-minded Rights of Man while consuming sweetened coffee and smoking pipes of tobacco produced by New World slaves. British traders in China sold opium off one side of their ships to feed addictions and gave out Bibles off the other to deliver salvation, confirming both Marx's dictum that religion was the opium of the masses and the twentieth-century wit who countered that opium had become the religion of the masses.

European and North American consumers were not bothered by the fact that these food drugs that contributed so much to leisure and pleasure in northern consuming countries caused exploitation, landlessness, and impoverishment of the producing class in the South and East. In every case they were produced in poor countries for use in rich lands and enriched the rich disproportionately. Drug foods had very different effects in the countries where they were produced than in those where they were consumed. While stimulating fortunes, monetarization, and wage labor in Europe and North America, they spread slavery in the producing countries (reading 3.6). Coerced labor often was needed to cultivate these drugs. States usually oversaw the coercion as, for example, the African slave trade, and organized the production of drugs. In other cases, such as in Southwest China in the nineteenth century and Burma and Colombia today, production of criminal contraband led to increased violence and criminal influence in the producing areas. Drugs have been both the foundations and the bane of states.
Thus, foods that were first consumed for the earthly pleasures they bestowed, the “taste of paradise,” became commodities that many producers found satanic. But they must be recognized as a foundation of the world economy, not an aberration.

3.1 Chocolate: From Coin to Commodity

When Christopher Columbus encountered a large Maya trading canoe in 1502 he knew he had stumbled upon something of value. Some of the Maya traders dropped almond-like objects and began to furiously scramble to pick them up “as if their eyes had fallen out of their heads.” These curious beans were known in Mayan as *ka-ka-wa*, which the Aztecs changed to *cacao* and the Spanish eventually corrupted into *chocolate*.

The cacao bean had been prized in Mesoamerica since before the time of Christ. The Olmecs, the Americas’ first civilization, used cacao and in turn passed on the custom to the Maya. Grown only in the tropical lowlands, cacao was traded to the highland civilizations of Teotihuacán and later the Aztecs. It was as much coveted for its pharmacological effects and rarity as for its taste.

Cacao was considered to be a stimulant, intoxicant, hallucinogen, and aphrodisiac. Warriors would count on cacao’s caffeine to steel them in battle. Others would drink fermented chocolate and feel intoxicated by the beans, especially if they were still green (and when consumed in conjunction with the psilocybin mushroom as in some religious festivities). And men such as the Emperor Moctezuma would imbibe the potion before going to make love with their many wives. The drink also served as a cure for anxiety, fever, and coughs.

Taste was also important. They added many spices, some of which we today might not appreciate. Usually made into a beverage by adding water, chocolate was commonly drunk with chile peppers, flowers that resembled black pepper, the seeds of the pizle—which gave a bitter almond taste—or lime water. Maize was used to thicken it. Only when the Maya or Aztecs added honey and vanilla does the drink sound familiar.

Chocolate occupied a unique position in the Aztec marketplace. It was greatly desired, but rare. Natural stands of cacao trees grew in the tropical lowlands but the Maya peoples who lived in these areas were largely self-sufficient peasants. Although we now know there were large Mayan cities, no evidence of marketplaces in them has yet been unearthed. Tribute served to bring surplus to the aristocrats. There was some long-distance trade of precious goods, but there is no evidence of an important merchant class among the Maya. Hence, despite substantial demand for cacao in the Mexican highlands, production was small.
Indeed, cacao beans were so precious and rare that they were used as money. Since the Aztec economy was mostly on the basis of face-to-face barter, cacao represented an important opening to monetarization. That cacao really was thought of as a form of money was demonstrated by the fact that cacao beans were sometimes counterfeited! Empty cacao shells were filled with clay, which, according to the first Spanish viceroy, looked “exactly the same, some grains better some worse.”

It might seem absurd to have money growing on trees. But in fact the Spanish continued this tradition in central Mexico for decades and in parts of Central America for centuries. In Costa Rica, the governor was still making his purchases with cacao beans in the eighteenth century. Some Catholic friars, who played a large part in introducing cacao to Europe, suggested that the beans be used as money in Spain as well. No doubt the idea of money rotting away appealed to these critics of capitalism and usury.

Ascetic priests were the first to popularize chocolate in Spain and neighboring countries. Chocolate was considered a Catholic drink just as coffee was first a Muslim drink and then a Protestant beverage. The Jesuits in particular were so taken by chocolate that they became involved in cacao production. Indeed, they were denounced by some secular competitors for trying to monopolize the trade.

Although introduced into Spain as a spiritual drink of abstinence, it soon became, as in Mexico, the aristocracy’s drink of leisure, luxury, and distinction. In early sixteenth-century Spain, chocolate was mixed with water, sugar, cinnamon, and vanilla. Two centuries later, hot chocolate was finally made with milk. The first stimulant to gain favor in Europe, cacao became Spanish America’s primary export agricultural good.

European imperialists, unlike pre-Columbian imperialists such as the Aztecs, were able to control production as well as distribution. Driven by the capitalist world economy, production now moved away from Mexico’s wild stands to plantation agriculture. Cacao trees were cultivated in Venezuela and Central America and then transplanted to the Philippines and Indonesia, Brazil, and finally Africa. The cacao bean became a commodity rather than a coin. A colonial crop until the eighteenth century, its production only became really large once the colonial aristocracy ceased being the principal customers. Chocolate became domesticated as women and children drank cocoa (invented in 1828 by the Dutchman Van Houten) and ate the many sweets that were made after milk chocolate was developed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Chocolate today is a sweet treat, a small indulgence. But let us not forget its heroic days when it was the beverage of princes and warriors, the days when money grew on trees.
3.2 Brewing Up a Storm

In the 300 years between Columbus’s voyages and the industrial revolution, three kinds of trans-continental trade boomed. One was the slave trade from Africa to the New World. Another was the export of huge amounts of gold and silver from the American mines to both Europe and Asia. The third—and the only kind to last well into the industrial age—was a boom in what have been called the “drug foods”: coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate, tobacco, and later opium.

Most of these mildly addictive little luxuries went to Europe; and most became cheap enough for the masses because (regardless of where they originated) they began to be grown on vast New World plantations, combining plentiful cheap land and cheap slave labor.

Only tea production never shifted to the New World, remaining an Asian peasant crop that eluded direct Western control for 400 years. Yet tea also became the national drink of England, an industrial and colonial superpower that spared no effort to control production of its other necessary raw materials. What made tea so important, and so different from its “drug food” cousins?

Tea was known in China as least as far back as 600 A.D. and spread to Japan and Korea not long afterward. The earliest exporters of the new beverage were Buddhist monks, who went to Chinese temples seeking enlightenment—and brought back stimulation, too. (The two may not have been unconnected: legend has it that monks became big consumers of tea when they realized it would keep them awake as they struggled to prepare for ordination exams.) The drink was not cheap, and never won universal acceptance, even in China; poor people in the North generally drank boiled water instead. Yet enough people wanted it that it soon covered many South China hillsides (the only places it would grow), and helped fuel medieval China’s commercial revolution. The drink also became widely associated with Chinese civilization, hospitality, and discussions among the cultured elite, and so acquired a prestige that made it a valuable export to the rest of East, Southeast, and Central Asia. (In a backhanded tribute to the symbolic association of tea and sociability, poor North Chinese often drank their boiled water with the same rituals that accompanied tea drinking in the South, and sometimes even called their beverage “tea.”)

In fact, tea found such a welcome abroad that it soon became a strategic good in which the Chinese state took an interest. The nomadic and seminomadic peoples of Central Asia—Mongols, Eleuths, Turks, and others—so coveted tea that it soon became the principal item sold them in exchange for the war horses they raised—the world’s best. As a result, the Chinese
government tried at times to organize a state monopoly to produce and transport tea, making sure that enough was available for this trade at a price they could afford. (After a hard-pressed government set tea procurement prices too low and wrecked some centers of production in the 1100s, later regimes turned to a more successful policy of regulating the trade rather than running it.)

And from Central Asia, the tea habit reached other new markets: Russia, India, and the Middle East, where sweetened tea (something not found in East Asia) provided a welcome substitute for wine, which was either forbidden (as in the Islamic world) or impossible to grow (as in Russia).

But in part because of tea’s strategic function, its cultivation spread far more slowly than its use. It was a crime to take tea plants out of China, and until the mid-nineteenth century that country remained the source for most of the world’s production. (Japan was more or less self-sufficient, but not a source of exports.) And while most of Asia was content to rely on China for much of its tea supply, the Europeans—who began to import the beverage in the 1600s—were, in the long run, less willing to accept this monopoly arrangement.

The Portuguese found Chinese tea for sale when they ventured into Southeast Asia in the 1500s. But it was mostly the lower-quality variety, which survived the long trip from China better than the best tea. And while tea is noted in England, France, and Holland in the 1600s, it did not find a wide market. Indeed, Western Europeans seemed primarily interested in using tea as a medicine rather than as an everyday drink. In 1693, even the English probably imported less than one-tenth of an ounce of tea per person.

The story changed completely in the eighteenth century. By 1793, the English imported over a pound of tea per person; the country’s total imports of tea had risen perhaps 40,000 percent. Although the reasons for this sudden shift in taste are not clear, the sudden availability of a cheap sweetener was certainly a factor. It was in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that slave plantations in the New World first made sugar affordable for the European masses. And changes in social life no doubt mattered, too. More and more artisans came to labor in workshops (or in some cases, early factories) separate from their homes; work hours became more regimented, and going home at mid-day for a long lunch less likely. In such a setting, short breaks that provided a shot of caffeine and sugar became an important part of work routines. And even if these early stirrings of industrialization did not quite cause the taste for tea, they certainly benefited from it. Tea, after all, replaced gin and beer as the national drinks in England—early factories were dangerous enough as it was without stupefied workers fumbling about their duties. Had tea and sugar not replaced alcohol
as the country’s principal cheap drink (and source of supplementary calories), the situation could have been far grimmer yet.

Dependence on tea, of course, had its price—one that the British did not wish to continue paying. As its import bills (all settled in silver) soared, the English sought in vain for a good they could sell to China in equal amounts. The answer they eventually found was opium grown in their Indian colonies, leading to war, dislocation, and a massive addiction problem in China.

Only after that “solution” was in place did Europeans begin to get their hands on the plants they needed to grow tea in their own colonies (growing it in Europe itself was impossible). Tea plants finally made it to Dutch-occupied Java in 1827, and to British-ruled Ceylon in 1877. Even then, these islands alone were insufficient to meet European demand.

Ultimately, a still larger area was needed: Assam, a very sparsely inhabited region of Northeast India filled the bill nicely. The Assam Tea Company was formed in 1839, just as the Opium War was beginning; but production did not really take off until the 1880s. The Assam Tea Clearance Act of 1854 gave any European planter who promised to cultivate tea for export up to 3,000 acres in the region. But the indigenous population had other ideas: clearing the forests for tea plantations (or any other form of private property) would mean the end of their seminomadic way of life.

It took no small amount of force—from outright warfare to tax collection that forced people into debt to laws against “trespassing” and “poaching” on the forest lands suddenly granted to foreigners—to displace these people. And it took plenty more effort to create the transport net, including heavily subsidized railroads, to ship large amounts of tea out of this remote and mountainous region.

In the long run, it worked: between about 1870 and 1900, Assam’s exports jumped twentyfold and other regions in the Himalayan foothills also saw tea-growing take off. (One of the most famous, Darjeeling, is within sight of Mt. Everest.) At last, the West had a tea supply equal to its thirst, and as safely controlled by the consuming countries as were its supplies of coffee, sugar, and other little “pick-me-ups.” But the tea plant’s road from China to India had been even harder—and more surprising—than a trek over the dizzying peaks between them.

3.3 Mocca Is Not Chocolate

When Jean de la Roque and three French East Indian Company ships arrived in Yemen’s port of Mocca in 1708, they were the first Frenchmen ever to round Africa and sail into the Red Sea. They had undertaken this dangerous year-long voyage with one purpose in mind: as a way to purchase coffee directly.
Although coffee has long been associated with Latin America, for some three hundred years—half of coffee’s lifetime as a commodity—*coffeea arabica* was an Arabian monopoly. Not only was all of the world’s commercial coffee produced in the mountains of Yemen, but the great majority of it was consumed in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. Most galling the Gauls, the commercial middlemen were also mostly Arabian, Egyptian, and Indians. But this would soon change. De la Roque was an integral part of a tide that would sweep away that monopoly, leaving behind only a faint and distorted memory.

Although *coffeea arabica* appeared as a native plant in Ethiopia, the coffee beverage was probably developed around 1400 in the Yemeni city of Mocca. By 1500 the beverage became ubiquitous on the Arabian peninsula. Muslims adopted it in their worship and spread the beverage throughout the Islamic world as far as India and Indonesia, as religious pilgrims brought beans back from their pilgrimages to Mecca. Coffee also became intimately related to the growth of secular society. The café was born in the Middle East. Restaurants were almost unknown and taverns were forbidden to Muslims. Hence, coffeehouses became one of the few secular public places in Muslim lands short on public space.

Europeans were slow to adopt the coffee habit for several reasons. First, as a Muslim drink it was viewed as heretical. Second, the Turkish fashion of a very thick, hot, black unsweetened drink did not please European palates. Finally, the rather rare caffeine spice or drug was quite expensive. In fact, Europeans rarely consumed the drink before the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

Coffee’s role in sociability and prestige in Europe was enhanced by the arrival of emissaries of the Ottoman Sultan in France and Austria in 1665–1666 who poured the exotic liquor for their aristocratic European guests during extravagant soirees. The Turks also propagated European coffee drinking unintentionally. When their siege of Vienna in 1683 failed to break the Austrians’ spirit, the Turks departed, leaving behind bags of coffee. The owner of the first Viennese coffeehouse then thought to remove the sediment from Turkish coffee and add honey and milk, which made it much more attractive to Europeans. But the arabica remained a rather exceptional specialty product.

The problem was coffee’s high price. Yemen’s artisanal production, layers of commercial intermediaries, and expensive transport made coffee something of a luxury. Until the 1690s it was grown only in Yemen on small, steep, irrigated mountain gardens by hundreds of peasants in three coffee districts.

The town of Betelfaguy, a two-day trip inland from Mocca, was one of
the major markets. Farmers brought their beans down from their nearby plots throughout the year. De la Roque noted that the harvest was "not fixed and regular so that the Arabians know no crop." Growers brought their coffee in small increments six days a week; when the price was low they held back. In the marketplace Indian merchants (particularly from the city of Banaras) and Arabs controlled the trade. Even though the Dutch and British East Indian Companies had representatives in Mocca beginning in the early seventeenth century, they—as did de la Roque—used Indian intermediaries who were said to drive the hardest bargain. The Europeans’ commercial position was weak because they had no political influence and the only European good the Yemeni wanted was Mexican silver piasters—on the spot.

Although coffee was one of world trade’s most precious goods, de la Roque discovered that this was still very much petty, face-to-face commerce embedded in a tributary state. He had to sign a treaty with the governor of Mocca to be permitted to trade in the first place. Then he had to wait patiently for coffee to come to the market. He ultimately purchased some 600 tons of coffee, but it took six months to acquire that amount. When de la Roque attempted to solve this bottleneck by advancing a large sum to an Indian merchant who claimed special access to coffee, he was swindled.

Not only did assembling the cargo require a lengthy stay, the sudden burst of demand that the Frenchmen represented caused prices to escalate. Prices had already swollen tenfold in twenty-five years because of Europeans’ growing taste for the arabica. Now de la Roque caused another spurt, so irritating the Turks that the sultan’s ambassador complained to Yemen’s king about the European’s direct purchases. In addition to suffering rising prices, the sultan was losing customs duties.

The Ottoman had good reason to be concerned. Theirs was already an expensive and cumbersome route from Yemen’s mountains to their own cafés. They transported their purchases from Betelfaguy to a small port ten leagues away on camelback. Then they shipped the cargo sixty leagues to the major Ottoman port on the Red Sea, Jeddah, where it was transferred to Turkish ships and sailed to Suez. At Suez, the coffee returned to camelback for the trip to Cairo or Alexandria. From Alexandria the cargo was again shipped, this time to Constantinople. Until de la Roque’s voyage, almost all French coffee was also bought in Alexandria and shipped to Marseilles. This was such an expensive route that de la Roque found his direct venture all the way around the Cape of Africa to Mocca profitable—even though it took two and a half years to complete!

Pleased by the success of the voyage, de la Roque returned to Mocca two
years later when he made a visit to the king of Yemen, whom he found planting a large garden of coffee trees. The Frenchman criticized the monarch, explaining that European kings planted only decorative plants in their botanical gardens, adding “if there was any fruit, they generally left it to their courtiers.” The king was unimpressed by this argument.

What made this discussion so poignant was de la Roque’s discovery upon returning to Paris that he was wrong about Louis XIV’s botanical garden. The merchant ended his account of his adventure: “We cannot end this treatise more properly, nor agreeably than by speaking of... the coffee tree which is at length arrived from Holland.”

Planted in the Sun King’s garden, this plant was a progenitor of European colonialism in the Americas. It would be the ancestor of many of the coffee trees that would be planted in the Americas as its seedlings were taken across the Atlantic. The French had found a way to break the Arab coffee monopoly. Within fifty years, coffee grown in Martinique was displacing Mocca coffee in the Cairo market! Yemen could not compete with colonial production. By 1900 Yemen produced less than 1 percent of the world’s coffee and the formerly thriving port city of Mocca had fallen to four hundred stragglers living amidst its landlocked ruins. Today, the only memory of proud Mocca’s three-hundred-year hold on the world coffee market is a drink distinctive for adulterating coffee grown in the Americas with chocolate!

3.4 The Brew of Business: Coffee’s Life Story

Coffee starts our morning, organizes our work breaks, and complements our meals. The world’s second most traded commodity is such an integral part of modern life that the world before coffee is unthinkable. Yet it took a five-hundred-year voyage to reach your breakfast table. Along the way it passed through four continents and wore many masks.

The legendary Ethiopian shepherd who hopped around after tasting the bitter berries that left his flock animated and in disarray, discovered the secret that eventually led to coffee’s domestication in Yemen. The Arabs who transported the berries across the Red Sea may well have been slave hunters, linking from the beginning the beverage and human chattel, a horrible marriage that would last four hundred years. At first welcomed by the mystical Sufi in Arabia who wished to stay awake to contemplate the infinite in the mid-fifteenth century, coffee soon was denounced by conservative mullahs who feared that its addictive properties would divert men’s minds from exploring the sublime; already in 1511 they burned bags of coffee in the streets of Mecca. Later, the Turkish grand vizier decreed that
the punishment for operating a coffeehouse was cudgeling; for a second
offense the perpetrator was sewn into a leather bag and thrown into the
Bosporous.

These rulers were right to fear the sociability of coffee. Coffeehouses in
Cairo, Istanbul, Damascus, and Algiers became centers of political intrigue
and fleshly vice. From stimulating, to addictive, to subversive, coffee’s
trajectory would be repeated in other centuries and on other continents.

In Europe, coffee’s favor rose in the seventeenth century along with the
emergence of commercial capitalism. The medieval Mideastern bean
evolved into a Western capitalist commodity. Fittingly, it was first brought
to Europe by Venetian traders. Thank God! Otherwise we might not have
espresso and cappuccino. But the first purveyors of coffee regarded it as a
medicinal drug that could cure sore eyes, dropsy, gout, and scurvy. London
merchants soon were imbibing the potion in coffeehouses that doubled as
centers of commerce. Jonathan’s and Garraway’s also served for three-
quarters of a century as England’s main stock exchanges; the Virginia and
the Baltic doubled as mercantile shipping exchanges; and Lloyd’s café be-
came the world’s largest insurance company. The coffeehouses served as
office buildings, “penny universities” that disseminated the latest news, and
the first men’s clubs. Coffee helped stimulate business but outraged wives
who, resenting their husbands’ addictions to the dark, noisy coffeehouses,
issued broadsides against the “base, black, thick nasty bitter stinking nau-
seous Puddle water” alleging that coffee caused impotence. King Charles II,
concerned more with café patrons’ political discussions than their familial
responsibilities, tried unsuccessfully to close them down. It would take the
rise of the East Indian Company and Indian colonies to make Britain a
teatotaling country.

On the continent, cafés came to symbolize and serve the beneficiaries of
capitalist prosperity who constituted the new leisure class that would be-
come known as “café society.” But not without a fight. Debates raged about
coffee’s medicinal value. In the best scientific tradition, Sweden’s King
Gustav III commuted the death sentences of twin brothers convicted of
murder on the condition that one be given just tea to drink and the other
coffee. The tea drinker died first—at age eighty-three—and Sweden be-
came the world’s largest per capita coffee consumer. Frederick the Great
was less open-minded and less concerned with his subjects’ health than
with their political proclivities and the balance of trade. He sought to pre-
vent commoners from drinking the brew by making it a royal monopoly. He
failed, though the high import duties restricted consumption to the relatively
affluent in major cities. The same was true in France and Austria.

But in the capitals cafés prospered. Their great popularity in Paris, ac-
according to Thomas Brennan, attested “to the elite’s determination to gather separately from its social inferiors.” Yet this was an elite of achievement, a bourgeois elite. Coffee’s great virtue, in contradistinction to alcohol, was that it stimulated the body while clearing the mind. Some coffeehouses such as Paris’s Procope served as centers of intellectual and artistic life where men like Voltaire skewered aristocratic foibles. The Café Heinrichhof in Vienna inspired Brahms and other great composers as well as merchants who preferred the sound of money. Other coffeehouses, such as my grandmother’s Café Mozart in Vienna, hosted cards and billiards and other such less inspired diversions. The leisure of the coffeehouse was serious business. Coffee “speak-easies” were intimately involved in the birth of civil society, public space, and the democratization of a semi-feudal aristocracy. Appropriately, then, it was at Paris’s Café Foy that Camille Desmoulins sat on July 13, 1789, planning the assault on the Bastille that ushered in the modern world. Coffeehouses continued to serve as bastions of intrigue and agitation during the French Revolution.

As clanging factories gave birth to the industrial age, coffee came to represent not only leisure, but also labor. In the United States coffee became democratic as a drug to prop up the drooping eyelids and awaken the flagging consciousness of an army of laborers. No longer primarily the beverage of spiritual contemplation, commerce, or leisure, coffee became the alarm clock that marked industrial time. By the late nineteenth century the café yielded to the cafeteria and café society to the coffee break. North Americans’ coffee imports swelled almost ninetyfold in the nineteenth century. Now instead of seeking divine inspiration as did those early Moslem patrons, profit as did London’s businessmen, or the artistic inspiration of continental drinkers, the straggling customers at the factory cafeteria sought survival. In some coffeehouses they plotted to subvert bourgeois society. And, in a ironic twist, temperance societies promoted coffee and coffeehouses as the antidote to the alcoholism of the saloon. The mullahs would have been dumbfounded to see coffee, derived from the arabic qahwah meaning “wine,” lauded as a remedy for one of the principal social ills of the industrial world: wine addiction.

Coffee consumption has continued to expand in the twentieth century, though it is now attacked for causing heart attacks and ulcers rather than praised for its invigorating qualities. Rather than a moment for spiritual contemplation or socializing, coffee drinking is often a hurried gulp while sitting at the wheel of the car or on the run. Coffee not only fuels the agitated pace of modern industrial life, it has become itself an industrial commodity. Some of the modern processed concoctions that shamelessly masquerade as coffee are more the invention of chemists than farmers.
Coffee has become domesticated, commodified, and adulterated; although some religions still denounce it, coffee has lost its subversive edge. From Ethiopia to Yemen to Europe and then the fields of Latin America, coffee has accompanied the development of the modern world. From divine elixir to bourgeois beverage to industrial commodity, coffee has become the brew of business.
It's a vaguely familiar story, though not a pretty one. One hundred fifty years ago, British seapower forced China to accept the Treaty of Nanjing, ending the three-year Opium War. China was forced to tolerate massive imports of a powerful addictive drug and various other injuries; but the treaty's clauses and defenders spoke more generally of promoting free trade and "opening" China.

Not only British generals, but supposed liberals and radicals throughout the West, assured their audiences that opium was a side issue. Former U.S. president John Quincy Adams, no lover of European colonialism, explained that "Britain has the righteous cause . . . but to prove it, I have been obliged to show that the opium question is not the cause of the war. The cause of the war is . . . the arrogant and insupportable pretension of China that she will hold commercial intercourse with the rest of mankind . . . upon the insulting and degrading forms of lord and vassal." Even Karl Marx argued that the real significance of the Opium War was that the global bourgeoisie's insistence on "battering down the Great Wall" would bring a "stagnant" China not only into the world market, but into world history.

Nobody today would defend dope-peddling at gunpoint; but the received wisdom remains that drugs per se were not the big story. John King Fairbank, dean of U.S. sinologists, explained the war in words Adams could have endorsed: "the Chinese position on foreign relations . . . was out of date and insupportable . . . Britain represented all the Western states in demanding diplomatic equality and commercial opportunity . . . it was an accident of history that the dynamic British commercial interest in the China trade was centered not only on tea, but on opium." One of his students wrote that had war not broken out over opium, it could as easily have happened over cotton or molasses.

But in fact, opium was not incidental. A closer look shows that it was central to promoting world trade and accelerated economic growth—not for China, of course, but for Europe and the Americas.

The international opium trade began in the 1700s as an answer to a crisis
The British, sound financial minds to the end, were aghast in the face of such terrible waste. Having sacrificed some opium, the British were not about to sacrifice their rights as free-born Englishmen. The war they took to the Chinese—which ended with the seventy-five-ship assault on Chinkiang—was less a war for opium, they said, than a war for freedom of trade. Never mind the product. What the British wanted—and what they won after three years of very strange battles—was the freedom to establish bases at the port cities of Canton, Amoy, Foochow, Ningpo, and Shanghai. They wanted islands off the China coast. And, above all else, the British wanted money.

The Opium War was less a war than a series of battles against a badly armed, disorganized empire. In battles along the Chinese coast, two or three well-placed armed British frigates were able to overwhelm Great-Wall efforts at national defense. The Blonde turned her broadside guns on the city of Amoy as a thousand Chinese who had struggled to a high point outside the city looked on. There was not, after all, much to be done in a nation defending itself with bows, arrows, and sheer numbers. To the north, the Atlanta, Wellesley, Conway, and Alligator opened seventy guns on Tinghai, sent ashore a landing party, and raised the standard of the Royal Irish Grenadiers on Chinese soil. Once on land, the British were positively without sympathy.

"The slaughter of fugitives is unpleasant," one British officer admitted, "but we are such a handful in the face of so wide a country and so large a force that we should be swept away if we did not read our enemy a sharp lesson whenever we came in contact."

And read a lesson they did. Several Chinese cities—including Canton and Yongchow—were suitably impressed and offered the British millions in silver to flex their military muscles at the expense of some other feckless Chinese city.

While most battles were just as easy, several were not. At Dinghai, bungling English officers camped their troops in mud that seemed to metamorphose into dense clouds of mosquitoes. Less than half of the 3,300 soldiers survived the diarrhea, malaria, and dysentery. In the winter, vicious monsoons stripped sails from British masts, scoured decks of English sailors, and drove British ships into the sheltering lee of coastal islands. In the summer, a hellish sun beat down on colonial British footsoldiers like nothing so much as a two-by-four across the forehead.

But only the British fought. Though they too were opium traders, other Europeans and the North Americans refused to raise a gun in support of the British effort. Nor did they try to halt the massacre. U.S. Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs John Quincy Adams concluded that the British response to Chinese insolence—in refusing to truck and barter with the West—was reasonable. In Western eyes, the Chinese treated every-
in Europe’s (especially Britain’s) international trade. For centuries, Europe had consumed spices, silk, and other Asian products, but exported very little to Asia. Spain’s conquests in the New World provided a temporary solution. New World gold and silver were shipped in huge quantities to Asia—perhaps 50 percent of these metals found their way to China alone—in return for things that Europeans could actually consume. But by the mid-1700s, Europe’s Asian imports were reaching new levels (particularly in England, where tea became the national drink). Meanwhile, the New World mines were yielding less ore, and new cargoes from the Americas (mostly sugar and tobacco) were also draining Europe’s cash hoard.

So how to pay for all these new tastes? Force was one answer: conquer producing areas in Asia directly and make them export to meet new taxes. The Dutch (in Indonesia) and the British (in India) each had some success, but not enough; and the Chinese state was still far too strong to contemplate such measures there. Meanwhile, attempts to sell European products—including British woolens in semitropical Canton—remained frustrating.

Eventually the British East India Company turned to opium, which could be produced in its Indian colony. The drug (previously used in China as a medicine, but rarely as a narcotic) was initially a luxury: bored government clerks, soldiers garrisoned at long-pacified sites, and wealthy women confined to home were among the early users. This traffic grew more than twentyfold between 1729 and 1800, which helped stanch the flow of bullion from Britain to China. But the flow was not decisively reversed. For China these imports—enough to supply perhaps one hundred thousand addicts in a nation of 300 million—were serious but not catastrophic.

The consequences became more grave when in 1818 somebody developed a cheaper, more potent blend called Patna opium. The results were as spectacular as those that the Medellin cartel would later achieve by turning expensive cocaine into cheap crack. The Indian opium entering China in 1839 was enough to supply 10 million addicts. Enough silver now flowed out of China to buy opium to offset much of Britain’s world-leading import bill—and cause monetary havoc in parts of China.

The number of addicts became sufficiently alarming that China took a stand in 1839, with dreadful results. The Chinese not only lost their battle to exclude dope and their war with the British navy: they lost their tariff autonomy, a large indemnity, the right to subject foreign residents to Chinese law, and the land that would soon be Hong Kong. The worst was yet to come: its military weakness exposed, China entered a calamitous century of foreign aggression, domestic disorder, and civil war. Skyrocketing opium use—to perhaps 40 million addicts by 1900—played no small role in this.

One might think that the opium trade—and all the suffering it caused—
would have become unnecessary to Britain just about the time that they went to war over it. After all, by the 1840s Britain was the world’s industrial leader, and would remain so until the eve of World War I. It seems a good guess that “the workshop of the world” would not need to sell drugs to pay its import bills. Had China granted the British the free trade they demanded, couldn’t the civilized Europeans they have done without selling this one commodity? No. The British still needed opium, even in the early 1900s. Industrial superiority did not guarantee adequate foreign exchange in an era when most of the world still used few mass-produced goods and Britain’s appetite for foreign foods (and raw materials) grew as fast as its industrial might. When Britain had turned to free trade in the 1830s and 1840s, the problem got worse: a flood of New World grain and meat was now added to tea, sugar, tobacco, and cotton. Meanwhile, most of Europe and North America stuck to protectionism, limiting British sales in the world’s richest markets for manufactured goods—and nurturing new industrial competitors. By 1910 Britain’s deficit with the Atlantic world was so large that even doubling British exports to the United States and industrial Europe would not quite have balanced the books.

Invisibles—returns on foreign investment, shipping, insurance fees, and the like—helped a bit, but not nearly enough. Moreover, Britain was a large and vital supplier of capital to the very countries with which it ran huge deficits.

This imbalanced trade, which subsidized living standards in England and rapid growth elsewhere in the West, was sustained for decades by Britain’s trade with India and China, in which opium played a key part. As late as 1910, Britain’s 120 million pound deficit in the Atlantic world was largely balanced by its trade with Asia. The empire (not counting India) had a 13 million pound surplus with China; and aside from cotton thread, manufactures contributed less to this surplus than did farm products, including non-Indian opium.

Most important of all was Britain’s annual 60 million pound surplus with India—about half of its deficit in the Atlantic world. British manufactures of all sorts—from cloth to kerosene to railroad cars—completely dominated the Indian market, aided by protection against other industrial countries and (in the case of textiles) laws that hobbled India’s own producers. The foreign exchange that enabled India to keep buying all these British goods came in large part from China, especially from drugs.

Britain itself was India’s biggest customer (taking 54 percent of exports in 1870), but obviously not the source of India’s cash hoard. India earned large surpluses on its trade primarily in Asia—and especially China. From 1870 to 1914, India ran an annual surplus of about 20 million pounds with China; by 1910, its surplus with the rest of Asia as a whole was about 45 million pounds.

And how did India earn those surpluses? With rice, cotton, and indigo,
but above all with opium. In 1870, opium accounted for at least 13 million pounds, or two-thirds of India’s surplus with China. It remained the most important item in Sino-Indian trade until the early twentieth century, and also figured prominently in exports to Southeast Asia. In other words, dope not only helped create Britain’s direct surplus with China, it made possible the even larger British surplus with India. Without those surpluses, Britain could not have remained the West’s chief consumer and financier; and the Atlantic economy as a whole would have grown much more slowly. Though a century of British-led industrialization transformed much of the West, it was only near the end of that century that the West outgrew its reliance on piracy in Asia.

This equation still leaves a mystery: China had no countries with which it ran huge surpluses. So how did it pay for its century of unbalanced trade with Britain and India, which was so important to the growth of the world economy? Records are not good enough to offer a definitive answer. But the best bet is that remittances from Chinese workers and merchants overseas plugged the gap.

The already substantial Chinese communities in Southeast Asia grew much more rapidly as late-nineteenth-century colonialism opened up new areas for export-oriented production. The California gold rush created openings in the New World; plantations from Cuba to Hawaii sought cheap and skilled sugar-growers; and new channels of information made it easier to know what opportunities existed in the first place. Since millions of these workers came without wives and children (often at the insistence of their “host” societies), those laborers who resisted gambling and brothels could send a fair amount home even out of tiny paychecks; and telegraphs and new financial institutions made the transfers easier. No hard numbers are available, but the totals must have been quite large. Thus the Chinese laborer laying track for the Union Pacific may not only have provided muscle to build the railroads: his earnings, routed through China to India to England to the United States may have helped provide the capital, too.

Thus opium not only bound together China, India, England, and the United States in a quadrilateral of trade, but also played a central role in sustaining Britain’s industrialization drive and the revolutionary nineteenth-century expansion of the world economy.