

### Introduction: A New Global History of Drugs

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The Oxford Handbook of Global Drug History

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter reveals how a global “New Drug History” has evolved over the past three decades, along with its latest thematic trends and possible next directions. Scholars have long studied drugs, but only in the 1990s did serious archival and global study of what are now illicit drugs emerge, largely from the influence of the anthropology of drugs on history. A series of key interdisciplinary influences are now in play beyond anthropology, among them, commodity and consumption studies, sociology, medical history, cultural studies, and transnational history. Scholars connect drugs and their changing political or cultural status to larger contexts and epochal events such as wars, empires, capitalism, modernization, or globalizing processes. As the field expands in scope, it may shift deeper into non-Western perspectives, fluid historical definitions of drugs; environmental concerns; and research on cannabis and opiates sparked by their current transformations or crises.

Keywords: history of drugs, historical methods, anthropology, commodity studies, cultural studies, opiates, heroin, cocaine, amphetamines, cannabis

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\*DESPITE their widespread prohibition, illicit drugs such as opiates, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamines, and the myriad of psychedelics and synthetics are fundamental features of the modern world, with historical antecedents in virtually all human societies going back to prehistory. Today’s illicit global drug trade is among the world’s most lucrative revenue flows and affects tens of millions of consumers, abusers, or addicted users of mind-altering drugs across the planet. Even in early modern times, novel intoxicants such as tobacco sparked widespread controversy, but today drugs draw outsized attention in politics and culture because of the visible social and public health crises associated with their traffic and use (such as heroin overdoses and trafficking violence) and their globalizing threat to national boundaries. Illicit drugs also spark audible political debates about the failures or costs of twentieth-century United Nations-sanctioned global drug prohibitions, as well as mass culture industries that openly cater to popular fascination with forbidden drugs (*Weeds*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Narcos* in the United States or the *narco-novelas* of Mexico and Colombia).

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Despite the notoriety and ample interest in drug-related topics, most scholars, students, and the educated public have scant knowledge of the rich and deep history connecting human societies with drugs, or their global ubiquity. Ethnobotanists and anthropologists began researching mind drugs in the late nineteenth century, and by the 1960s the burgeoning “drug culture” let loose a long wave of journalistic, sociological, and medical writings about modern illicit drugs. Almost none of these publications were rooted in archival research or written by trained or professional historians. Amateur writers and journalists continue to dominate the always-vast marketplace of books about illicit drugs. Most of these writings are mythological, anecdotal, partisan, or retread versions of traditional sources, ideas, and legends about drugs.

However, starting in the 1990s, academic historians began to forge what is elsewhere termed the “new drug history.”<sup>1</sup> This was mainly an attempt to move the minuscule field beyond the domination of biomedical, legal, and journalistic perspectives. By the early twenty-first century, the drug history field had become largely professional, with (p. 2) new doctorates produced every year in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. It is also highly global in scope and locale, with new drug historians actively working on the Americas writ large, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Drug historians have absorbed the sophisticated archival tools of the guild while adapting an array of innovative cross-disciplinary cultural and sociological methods. They converse with each other across borders in a number of thriving international professional associations, notably in the Alcohol and Drugs History Society (ADHS) and its expanding journal *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* (*SHAD*).<sup>2</sup> And many historians continue to productively study widely used licit stimulants and pleasures such as alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine, as well as the relationships of drugs to medical science and religious cultures.

Others are delving more systematically into the modern origins and elusive phenomena of criminalized drugs; their underworlds of users and dealers; their opaque social histories; their political, cultural, and environmental histories; and their legacies as banned pariah drugs.<sup>3</sup> Historians are commonly asking critical questions about how stimulants and inebriants began to connect the globe in the early modern age; how certain traditional and new drugs (and not others) became perceived as public menaces during the nineteenth century; how local and national medical regulations and treaty prohibitions developed on a world scale after 1909; and what roles race, gender, and class played in the construction of “addiction” or criminal user social types.<sup>4</sup> They investigate the place of colonialism and big-power politics in dispersing both drug use and drug restrictions, the consequences of a US-led global “war on drugs” that ramped up in the decades after the consolidation of the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs; the rise of “harm reduction” and similar drug reform movements in Europe, Latin America, and at the state level in the United States; and recent conservative backlashes, like those in Russia and Africa against drug trafficking. Some of this research is deeply historical (e.g., studies of the centuries-old botanical or colonial origins of drug trades and cultures), while some speak in recent historical terms to growing global public concerns about drug and penal reform

and regulating or normalizing our relationships with proscribed drugs (e.g., studies on the aftermaths of Cold-War drug politics and culture).

This *Handbook* is the first major attempt by historians of drugs to take stock of the progress and new directions of this field, on both a global and long-temporal scale. The thirty-five contributions prefaced here simultaneously survey what is known historically about drugs across the world, and how academic-trained historians are now approaching this still-fresh topic.

## A Brief Historiography of Drugs in History

Drugs and their storied pasts have long fascinated people, but it was not really until the 1990s that (longer attention to alcohol aside) one can seriously speak of a (p. 3) “historiography” of drugs.<sup>5</sup> From the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, sundry botanists, medical men, anthropologists, pioneer psychopharmacologists, and enthusiasts penned histories and categorizations of narcotics and drugs. Some are classics, such as those by the mid-nineteenth-century “father” of ethnobotany Baron Ernst von Bibra (*Plant Intoxicants*), turn-of-the-century American surgeon W. Golden Mortimer (*History of Coca*), and Weimer-era pharmacologist Louis Lewin (*Phantastica*).<sup>6</sup> Educated amateurs still contributed tomes in the mid-twentieth century, such as banker-mycologist Gordon Wasson in search of the fabled ancient South Asian vision-drug Soma.<sup>7</sup> But the larger drug studies field was pioneered by anthropologists, their discipline long attuned to the roles of intoxicants, alcohol, and plant shamanism in small-scale societies. They were joined by ethnobotanists such as the Harvard drug explorer Richard Evans Schultes (a towering figure in the United States), as well as legal scholars, criminologists, and sociologists like Alfred Lindesmith and Howard S. Becker who challenged the punitive direction of evolving American drug policies.<sup>8</sup>

The 1960s, and their aftermath of widespread entrenched recreational and illicit drug cultures, unleashed a torrent of writings on drug history. However, most of these were documentarian (including valuable reprints of drug classics) or synthetic in nature, depending on easily accessible published sources on drugs.<sup>9</sup> In the United States, most remained journalistic, sociological, legal, or medical in tone, not yet in sync with rising movements in academic history. Influential books in this genre (besides many serviceable collections of refurbished documents about “marihuana,” opiates, and cocaine) include Richard Bonnie and Charles Whitebread’s *The Marihuana Conviction: A History of Marihuana Prohibition in the United States* (1974), a legal scholars’ indictment of racial motives in the 1920s to ‘30s criminalization of pot. The prolific Lester Grinspoon, of Harvard Medical School, during the 1970s and beyond offered a slew of topical drug books (on cannabis, cocaine, amphetamines, psychedelics, and more) that deployed historical “background” on each drug to show shifting social attitudes toward their use and control.<sup>10</sup> Two such volumes with transformative impacts on the field were medical doctor David Musto’s *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotic Control* (1973), with serial republications that suggestively wove “America’s” long fascinations with drugs into the

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history of public health and racial panic; and Alfred McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (1972), by a bona fide historian with a radical but alluring thesis that modern heroin trafficking was historically rooted in Cold-War US governmental complicity in Asian military conflicts, including Vietnam. McCoy's work had its sights on accelerating global drug networks, yet most early work in the field was dominated by an Anglo-American historical axis, which likely affected its narrow choice of mostly institutional topics and methods. (A precocious exception was Franz Rosenthal's deeply legal-textual 1971 study of hashish in medieval Sunni Muslim societies.)<sup>11</sup>

The 1980s saw a number of professional historians digging deeper into archives to move beyond received narratives, joining and catching up with interdisciplinary movements like social history, oral history, and historical anthropology. It is intriguing to find that both David T. Courtwright and Virginia Berridge, of the United States and Britain respectively, published their deeply researched books on nineteenth- to early twentieth-century opiates in virtually the same years (1981–82), precursors to their (p. 4) later synthetic works influenced by the histories of medicine and global commodities.<sup>12</sup> Amid a heating up of the global war on drugs, diplomatic historians began revisiting the origins of global drug politics, for example, William Walker III for the United States and Latin America (1981), and later Anglo-America and China (1991), moving beyond the traditionally published apologetics of contemporaneous big-power diplomats and global elite participants in international drug diplomacy.<sup>13</sup> On the European scene, the Spanish philosopher Antonio Escohotado's use of easily retrievable sources and mythologies for his encyclopedic *Historia general de las drogas* (1989) may make that work feel dilettantish today. But his was arguably the most widely read and republished book worldwide on drug history, given its attractive libertarian thesis normalizing drug use across time and cultures. Another European thinker, Wolfgang Schivelbush, who first published his provocative *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants* in 1980 (1992 in English), suggested a formative role for drugs (broadly conceived to include spices, coffee, tobacco, and alcohol) and institutions like the eighteenth-century coffeehouse and the nineteenth-century bar in the making of European cultural politics.<sup>14</sup>

These kinds of influences, and particularly the blending of history and anthropology, came together in 1995 in what was probably the single-most transformative book for the academic history of drugs: *Consuming Habits: Drugs in History and Anthropology* (1995), edited by Jordan Goodman, Paul Lovejoy, and Andrew Sherratt. It is still well worth sampling the revisionist precis on the volume's dustjacket:

The consumption of psychoactive substances is as ancient as human societies and characteristic of most cultures. The central purpose of this book is to establish that psychoactive substances are integral to the construction of cultures; that they are a rich analytical category for the study of historical and cultural processes; and that the labeling of these substances as "legal" or "illegal" has served only to divert attention away from understanding their cultural and historical role.<sup>15</sup>

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Coming on the heels of historical anthropologist Sidney Mintz's groundbreaking 1985 volume *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, which introduced the hybrid study of "drug foods" (and in sync with anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's 1986 volume *The Social Life of Things*), the ten essays in *Consuming Habits* placed drug history squarely and dynamically in the rising global histories of consumption and culture.<sup>16</sup> Drug history had thus finally shed its mid-century amateur roots and caught up methodologically with the dynamic academic field of history. This history-anthropology synthesis has been the main driver of the expanding wave of drug history since the mid-1990s, though like most growing fields, it has now widely diversified its methodologies. By the 2000s, it went truly "global" from its initial Anglo-US-European base.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, dozens of scholars were seriously engaging archives about drugs across the world; drugs were no longer considered a "freakish" historical interest. An entire cottage industry arose, for example, of national histories of "addiction," and the ways different polities and cultures personified and constructed the threat.<sup>17</sup> In 2001, Harvard University Press published the academic field's first serious synthesis: Courtwright's *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World*, a tour de force that brought facets of global commodity history, biomedical perspectives, and state-building processes together into one argumentative whole. Courtwright coined the term "Psychoactive Revolution" to describe the ways until then disparate world drug cultures (caffeine, tobacco, alcohol, opium, cannabis, coca-leaf, and so on) came together under European commerce and capitalism, some faster than others, to cross the globe and change human consciousness and habits. Likewise, a decade later Virginia Berridge's *Demons: Our Changing Attitudes to Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drugs* (2013) emerged from across the pond to unpack the ways in which fundamental categories and representations of drugs, drink, and addiction have diverged and converged over time.<sup>18</sup> Gender politics, class, and distinctive public health traditions underlay the definitional shifts on dangerous "drugs" experienced distinctively in Britain and the United States since the nineteenth century.

Lest one think drug revisionism is too easily Eurocentric, Asian histories (and colonial histories generally) have also attracted innovating theses by major specialists in the field. For example, Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, and Zhou Xun's *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (2004) rigorously challenged the old nationalist narrative (repeated every year with each new popular book on the "Opium War") that China has been simply a victim civilization in the history of drugs, with no intricate drug history or agency of its own. Its thesis converged with Timothy Brook and Bob Wakabayashi's *Opium Regimes* (2000), which argued that rather than simply a destructive force, the imperial drug triangle between China, Japan, and the "West" contributed in various ways to the historical development of Asian states.<sup>19</sup> Closer studies of British colonialism and drugs, for example, by James Mills, suggested a more complex and active historical interplay between colonies like India and the metropole, beyond a one-sided imposition of either drugs or anti-drug ideologies and laws. Other studies, such as Miriam Kingsberg's on modern Japan, decenter imperial drug regimes by showing the mutual entanglements and political wash-back of Japanese imperialism on Japanese drug culture and national identity.<sup>20</sup>

By the 2010s, the number of solid monographs on drugs in China alone had skyrocketed, given the impulse and pace of Asian-based research. Latin American and Middle Eastern drug historians, more dispersed by modern nation-states, are not far behind, taking on with archival diligence traditionally dominant orientalized narratives as well as recent sensationalized representations of Third-World drug cultures and drug trafficking booms.<sup>21</sup>

## Drugs of Many Disciplines

As drug history has taken off and globalized its range since the 1990s, historians have implicitly or openly absorbed perspectives from a number of disciplines and traditions of drug studies. In “trespassing,” historians of drugs are no different from other (p. 6) contemporary historical currents that move from strictly archival or narrative pursuits to interdisciplinary methods (and running into the so-called history of the present). At the risk of overlap, a number of core influences are worth noting—to wit:

- **Anthropology:** As a discipline, anthropology has perhaps the longest-running association with drugs. Intoxicant and alcohol use exhibit extraordinary cultural, symbolic, and ritual roles and are central to many small-scale “shamanistic” societies throughout the world. Ethnobotany became an early recognized subset of the field, accumulating a wealth of knowledge about global human use of mind-altering plants.<sup>22</sup> The sister discipline of archaeology also lends a defined interest in drugs, including chemical analysis of alkaloidal traces in ancient sites, uniting the distant past to the ethnographic drug present. As anthropology moved toward history and “complex” societies after the 1970s, modern global “drug foods” became a burning concern.<sup>23</sup> Historians have absorbed both “relativism” from classical anthropology (societies treat intoxicants in fundamentally different and also changeable ways) and the varied recent fascinations with culture known as the “cultural turn.”
- **Commodity studies:** There are many varieties of commodity studies, and many of them are used by drug historians. Treating drugs neutrally as “goods” was one strategy of dealing with the moralistic or passionate views that drugs evoke. Drugs could be researched via solid business and corporate histories, especially those like cocaine that began as modern pharmaceutical wonders. The post-1980s “social life of things” school portrayed commodities and their meanings as culturally pliable and has been applied to the changing “biographies” of drugs and their subjective effects and legitimacies.<sup>24</sup> The field is also inundated with bestselling single commodity studies (of opium, coffee, cannabis, cocaine, etc.), typically built around a good’s long-hidden history of worldly connections. Another branch of commodity studies, derived from economic sociology, is “commodity chains” analysis (tracing and tying the pathways of goods from distant areas of supply to areas of consumption). This found its way, in varied shapes, into drug studies, as a means of normalizing their study as global “goods” that integrate peoples and distant geographies. Courtwright’s influential global drug synthesis, *Forces of Habit* (2001), starts from global commodity history, positing that the

historic timing or wave of a drug's incorporation into commerce, starting in the sixteenth century, largely determined its later probabilities as a profitable and legal drug (coffee, tobacco), versus proscribed and illicit drugs (opium, cocaine).

- **Consumption studies:** Key new historical studies (again, stimulated by Mintz's mid-1980s study of sucrose) underscore the vanguard role that stimulants and intoxicant trades (and related drug foods like sugar and rum) had in opening the early modern Atlantic economy and beyond, or their roles as new labor and ritually assimilated goods. Changing or constructed tastes and politics of goods became as crucial as understanding their material supply chains. Drugs became a facet of modernized consuming and leisure regimes.<sup>25</sup> All this was joined to the (p. 7) burgeoning field, spurred by 1990s-era cultural studies, of consumption cultures and the growing trend of food histories. Spices and stimulants play pivotal roles and are key issues here, instructive for drug history in how certain foods became culturally assimilated into world cuisines, while others were rejected. A recent concept pertaining to drugs is "ingestible goods" which stresses the tactile, emotive, sensory impacts of goods, like drugs, that enter and affect the body.<sup>26</sup> Courtwright in his latest big synthesis, *The Age of Addiction* (2019), is now vying to grasp drug consumption as just a subset of what he terms "limbic capitalism": the mass exploitation of a connected series of wired-in human habits (drugs, gambling, junk food, pornography, video games) by modern corporate business strategies.<sup>27</sup>

- **Sociology:** Sociology has contributed to drug histories via social history (subcultures of drug users); the linkage to state-building (vice and drug taxation); criminology (critical perspectives on deviance or crime networks); and drug ethnography, which observes contemporary user or dealing populations, free of penal or policing lenses. However, the core contribution here is the concept of the "social constructivism" of the drug experience, dating to Howard S. Becker in the 1950s, sometimes known as "labeling theory." It suggests that rather than one fixed or predictable "chemical" effect, or addictive effect, mind-altering drugs are "learned" or acquire defined effects through their social environments, often termed in related psychological research as "set and setting."<sup>28</sup> Some pharmacologists second this idea of the plasticity of mind drugs, skeptical of their own scientific "Cult of Pharmacology." A drug's history is, arguably, the largest set and setting in its social learning curve, so historians are starting to seriously integrate such constructionist ideas (beyond common sloganistic usage)—as in Isaac Campos's book, *Home Grown* (2012), about the shifting historical relationships between conceptions of cannabis and its bodily and sensory effects in Mexican history.<sup>29</sup>

- **Medical history:** Drug history mostly originated as a subfield of medical history, or medical authorities lending their professional authority about drugs. The boundaries between medicine and other types of drugs are highly fluid and doctors and pharmacists themselves were prime actors in drug history. Most mind-altering drugs were first historically read in the pharmacopeia lens; many "escaped" from initial medical usage (e.g., cocaine) or had long overlap with healing or analgesic drugs (e.g., opiates everywhere). For example, drug discovery and epidemiology are the central concerns in

many works about the “Age of Tranquilizers” or the “Anti-Depressant Era.”<sup>30</sup> As the history of medicine transformed itself in recent decades to a more “externalist” or critical view of medical science—medicine as an interdisciplinary object rather than a method of study per se—the prestige of purely medical approaches to drugs has waned. This is revealed in the history of “addiction,” where the many historians who have studied malleable concepts of “inebriation” and “habit” question its medical foundations. The “medicalization” of drugs becomes itself a subject of historical-cultural critique, an echo of the inquisitional views of drug policy voiced decades past by renegade psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (1974).<sup>31</sup> The relationship of drugs to changing cultural concepts of “health” (p. 8) and “body” is also a pressing concern. However, a call to balance medical knowledge and insight back into drug history is also gaining ground, most vocally through Courtwright himself, including recent developments in neuroscience and brain imaging.<sup>32</sup> This brings drugs back to the broader rise of science and technology studies (STS) as an interdisciplinary pole, particularly knowledge production about drugs and technologies of making and taking mind-altering drugs.

- **Cultural studies:** Cultural studies is a catch-all term for the wave of cultural, literary, and discourse-centered theory that has deeply impacted interpretive fields like history since the 1990s. Drugs are a particularly compelling topic in cultural studies, given the passionate and contested cultural meanings that drugs provoke. Literature and art are also primary sources for understanding the intrinsic subjectivities of drug experience. Many cultural studies of drugs are trenchant analyses of official, policing, or medical “discourses” around drugs, sometimes inspired by a Foucauldian genealogy method.<sup>33</sup> If cultural studies now appears ephemeral to historians, its enduring mark was to bring essential topics explicitly into drug history: modernity, gender, race, sexuality, emotion, and pleasure, among them. For example, racial stereotyping, gendered anxieties, and cultural discrimination are long tagged as a source of drug panics, addiction threats, and prohibitions (Chinese migrants and opium; Mexicans and cannabis in the United States). The approach of cultural studies offers striking narratives of how drugs “produce” racial stigma and categorization, for example, in the wake of the US crack boom of the 1980s–’90s.<sup>34</sup>

- **Globalization and transnationalism:** Drug history took off in the 1990s precisely when social scientists and historians were at the crux of lively debates about globalization: what it meant and how it compared to earlier global connections, empires, or world systems. Do new fluid transnational methods transcend traditional bordered national units, articulated by diplomatic ties? Historians know that drugs have long been battering rams of globalization, such as early modern tobacco, arguably the first global commodity besides precious metals. Colonial powers aggressively “bio-prospected” the global tropics. Modern legal concepts of “illicit” drugs were produced by vanguard global reform institutions (i.e., the 1912 Hague Conventions); drug smuggling, an ever-more researchable topic, is an ambiguous challenge to the regulatory power of nation-states.<sup>35</sup> A string of studies looks at how modern empires both disseminated colonial drugs (the nineteenth-century opium-for-tea nexus in Asia long the exemplar, but also regulatory and fiscal colonial opium monopolies) and the seeds in imperial backlash of



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what were to become modern restrictions on drugs in the metropole.<sup>36</sup> Needless to say, a multitude of methods inspire “international” and “global” histories, each now shaping drug research. One cutting-edge concern, for example, is the global and local environmental impact of spreading drug crops.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, drug history not only has its own historiography but is deeply enriched by borrowings from other disciplines. Drug history is intrinsically interdisciplinary. It is (p. 9) gaining ground because drugs themselves are a uniquely rich medium in which the “realities” of drug use (who uses, commercial networks) merge with “representations” (essential to the construction, effects, and politics of drugs). Drugs both are, and are not, like other goods. Perhaps the central question of drug history raised repeatedly by interdisciplinarity is how the boundaries and separated definitions of drugs themselves change in history and travel over geography: good drugs, bad drugs, pharmaceutical drugs, recreational drugs, soft drugs, hard drugs, ritual drugs, hedonist drugs, legal drugs, illegal drugs. Why are certain drugs embraced at certain times and places but fall into disrepute and rejection elsewhere? Are individual drugs—like single commodity studies—still worthwhile for study over the long term? Or are drugs best compared and conglomerated in their relationships to medicine; alcohol (still the world’s most pervasive intoxicant); legal alkaloid stimulants like coffee, tea, and chocolate (from which they also diverged); to other “vices” and capitalist goods and habits; or say today’s commercial “new age” nostrums or “energy drink” cocktails?

Drug history has survived a fertile “incubation” period and is quickly expanding in many new directions. The question is, do historians really need or prefer a separate field of research on drugs history? Or rather, do the richest historical insights originate precisely from the ways in which drugs are integral to the multiple concerns and contexts of contemporary historians, social scientists, policymakers, and cultural critics?

## New Directions in Drug History

Putting together this *Handbook* presents a timely opportunity to assess the progress and direction of this historical field, and perhaps suggests a response to that last question raised about the ultimate desirability of a new “drug history.” This field captures a rich diversity of themes, found clustered in these three dozen new historical surveys.

Most historians of drugs place their major transformations into the larger contexts of epochal events, including, above all, wars and imperial expansion or collapse, or more broadly, the social processes of state-building, modernization, national identities, mobility, and within the diverse waves of historical globalization since the sixteenth century.<sup>38</sup> These historical and social contexts, not the intrinsic properties of the drugs themselves, drive changes or expansion in drug use and regimes. Indeed, more and more, drugs are also used as an analytical tool or historical agent for exploring larger social and political processes, such as the formation of commercial and labor capitalism or of modern legal, racial, and state-building regimes. Similarly, premodern drug historians comfortably situ-

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ate drugs into larger civilizational frames, though now mostly shorn of essentialist mythologies.

Such ancient and prehistoric drugs are still fundamentally interpreted in the realm of religious experience, whether deciphered textually, symbolically, or archaeologically in material culture. Perhaps this is a given, as religion and spirituality usually govern the cycles or textures of human life in preindustrial societies. Ancient drugs filled substrates (p. 10) of cultural usage and display discernible paths of drug succession. This continuing research interest deepens understandings of the ritual, ecstatic, emotional, or sensory dimensions of drugs, though early discernible power and social differentials are coming into analysis, for example, the differential roles of drugs in hierarchical or territorialized state systems versus egalitarian or mobile shamanistic societies.<sup>39</sup>

What constitutes “drugs” remains a fluid and contested issue through virtually every period and place of known history, but is now related to changing (or distinctive) ideals of health, the body, medicine, religious ideals, and diversifying consumption or ingestion practices. On the ground, intermediaries such as pharmacists, botanists, shamans, or merchants, some of them subaltern or distant actors, appear essential in shifting the definitions and directions of drug trades. As elaborated below, this metamorphic definition of drugs—where history itself defines the various uses and kinds of drugs—continues to evolve.

Many histories (especially those set in South Asia and the Middle East) deliberately eschew the “Orientalism” and related European or colonial drug (and sometimes even anti-imperial) mythology that has long obscured their fields. Similarly, there is a growing ambivalence toward the romantic or “new age” celebration of ritual hallucinogenic use, notably in the Americas, with its structuralist lineage in shamanistic studies from anthropology. Hybrid culturally mixed, fluid meanings of modern drugs are quickly becoming a norm, rather than essentialized or static conceptions of their cultural place or impacts. If drugs are malleable in culture and politics, the same drug and its meanings may have likely changed a good deal through its history.

In terms of modern illicit drugs, criminological common sense—depicting traffickers as simply criminal actors, or users as uniformly deviants or passive victims—is fast fading. Whether viewed as addicts or casual consumers, drug users merit compassionate, nuanced, humane treatment by scholars. In many accounts they are emerging as “victims” of cruel or oppressive legal or carceral systems. While that change in tone represents a positive development, such labels must be applied to drug users with care so as not to condescendingly wipe away their human agency or the diversity of their experiences. The studies of those who deal drugs are likewise rife with new complications. Comparisons abound with legal consumer indulgence in intoxicants and stimulants or corporate drug marketers such as big tobacco or pharmaceutical firms. Historical trafficking networks and flows, now the subject of improving social-science analyses, appear anything but the monolithic and vertically organized “cartels” or set “connections” depicted by the media, journalistic writers, or international policing authorities.<sup>40</sup> Instead, they are generally re-

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active, flowing, dispersed, and highly adaptive to the global structures of drug prohibition, as well as to the local conditions of national politics.

Consumption phenomena remain pivotal for interpreting the drug experience; drug markets; the transformations of drug use forms; and their relationships to social, cultural, and political life. Modern recreational, exploratory, individualized, compulsive, or commodified drug consumption is still sharply differentiated from ancient or deeply socialized drug consumption. And the historical rise of world stimulant or intoxicant (p. 11) trades during and after early modern European commercial expansion, the crucible era of modern consumption practices, is read as a key precursor or foundation to later drug consumption, and drug conceptions, whether legal or not.

Historians today, after decades of engaging global perspectives, rarely make a zero-sum choice between nationally bounded studies of drugs (in national political cases like Germany, Japan, or Turkey) and far-flung transnational connective methods. In the modern nation-state era from the nineteenth century on, historians subtly pursue how national identity-making, political culture, and institution-building intersects with drug flows and cultural influx. Nor did seemingly imperious global forces (such as twentieth-century League of Nations or United Nations drug restrictive regimes) homogenize every nation-state's or locale's experience with drugs. Other historians fruitfully incorporate larger, interpenetrating, and shifting drug contexts, such as the global impacts of epochal events like European expansion, religious conflicts, the Cold War, cultural-civilizational perspectives, or drug flows that messily crisscross changing national spaces and boundaries.

Contemporary political debates about drugs indirectly impact and inform historians' questions and thinking about drugs. These include the international critique of prohibition regimes and drug wars, burgeoning European- (and now Latin American-) style "harm reduction" and other drug reform movements, and controversies about the "carceral state" and racial incarceration crisis in the United States and beyond. Race is both a given in drug research but also subject to critical empirical research. In contrast to a previous era's medicalization of drugs, drugs as an obvious public health problem, engaged perspectives appear skeptical about dangerous and medicalized drugs as given categories of analysis. Many historians are searching again for "evidence-based" historical instances or sites of harm reduction, or relative tolerance or safer social integration of drug consumption.

Most historians drawn to study drugs appear keenly interested in developing "drugs in history" in a broader sense, including so-called histories of the present. A separately defined field of "drug history" (including an artificial separation from alcohol or tobacco histories) may have helped to jump-start the field in the 1990s, but it is no longer the necessary or optimal way of understanding the illicit.

Historians typically beg off predicting future trends, as deciphering the past is challenge enough. However, from this perch, the decade of the 2020s certainly appears to be a tipping point toward a genuinely global drug history, as the number and kinds of historical studies multiply across the world. One may glimpse nascent trends of global drug history,

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distinctive from those just discussed that consolidated since its 1990s definition as an academic field.

First, we may expect an intensified globalism of drugs as scholarship pours in from and about Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These may change or even “decolonize” the dominant narratives that portray drug change, for example, as a byproduct of Western drug imperialism or later Anglo-American anti-drug political campaigns. Areas once thought bereft of strong drug history, such as Africa, may soon find pivotal roles, or regions like Latin America, once thought passive to US drug policies, look proactive (p. 12) instead.<sup>41</sup> Global regions of study themselves may be redefined by drug commerce or cultures, such as an interactive pan-Mediterranean basin, or Indian Ocean or Red Sea smuggling routes. Some of this new history (e.g., from China) may chafe at the consensus pointing to non-prohibitionist drug reform in the West.

Second, also continuing a trend, “drugs” seem to be evermore a concept in flux, an idea constantly traversing between medicine, culture, and law. In a step away from pathologized chemical addiction, a broader place for social pleasure and sensory intoxication is also redefining drugs. Many emerging studies point to the metamorphic qualities and experiential meanings of drugs—from the sixteenth-century slew of merchant “discoveries” of new drugs that coined the continuing term to the multiplicities of meanings around rapid twentieth-century laboratory discoveries.<sup>42</sup> And drugs themselves help to constitute new legal regimes rather than simply acquiring their status from laws. Therefore, “What are drugs?” will remain the field’s complexly protean central puzzle.

Third, the current wave of drug decriminalization in the Americas and Western Europe, albeit mostly about cannabis reform, will prompt new research questions and concerns. Cannabis, paradoxically, is the least studied of major world drugs, perhaps due to its recent “soft drug” or “stoner” status.<sup>43</sup> But nothing illustrates more dramatically than cannabis itself the rapid changeability of drug definitional status. In a few generations, “pot” went from a 1950s marker of deviant or dangerous outsider status, to a celebrated vehicle of 1960s middle-class rebellion and recreation, to a post-1990s medical panacea (including now non-intoxicant CBDs), to today’s massive commercial bonanza and social experiment in commercial or regulated consumption—changes experienced, to varying degrees, on a global stage. But reformers will want to know more about prior waves of medicalized cannabis (for example, of the late nineteenth century) and how its effects on consciousness and racial colorings were acquired and transformed over time and across borders. In many US states and localities, social justice concerns, including legal restitutions, are inscribed into liberalization campaigns, which require expert historical knowledge of users, drug markets, and prosecutorial regimes. Other places, for example Jamaica, will need to define what is “traditional” or religiously protected use.

In contrast to cannabis, opiates (heroin and pharmaceutical opioids like OxyContin and fentanyl) are the other and truly destructive drug “epidemic” since the early 2000s. This social crises is driving literally tens of thousands of overdose deaths annually is prompting a thorough rethinking of and new research into the opiate past and its failed litany of

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punitive, medical, overdose, and “treatment” regimes.<sup>44</sup> We are moving beyond traditional “opium wars” narratives that colored the historical imaginary of opiates. The changing interplay of ancient plant-based drugs and technological and market innovations is essential to this story. At the same time, the distance between “hard” and “soft” drugs seems further than ever, though with a new social twist. In the United States especially, the discernible shift from repressive and racial discourses about hard or addictive drugs (typical of the violence-prone 1980–’90s “crack age”) is giving way to growing public concerns with the socially marginalized, often rural (i.e., white) drug (p. 13) user as the passive “victim” of social blight and predatory pharmaceutical corporations. This paradoxical shift is a precursor, perhaps, to deeper historical thinking about opiate drugs, enveloped in racial thought since the era of the migrant opium den and modern urban criminal addict. As David Herzberg argues, the opiate crisis can be historicized as the outcome of a century-long US divide between regulated “white” market drugs and illicit “black” market drugs, in which the shading also signals a deep racial divide.<sup>45</sup>

As drug plants and drug wars spread into fragile global ecosystems, such as the western Amazon-Andes or the forests of northern California, a mounting concern is the environmental histories and impacts of alkaloidal and other particularly tropical drug plants.<sup>46</sup> Since the early modern Columbian exchange, caffeinated beverages and drugs-foods like coffee and tea, sugar, and tobacco deeply shaped and stressed natural environments (and massive labor systems including transatlantic slavery and coolie migration) across the planet’s tropical belt. The relationship of drugs-environmental transformation may date to the Neolithic transition, where research suggests the move to grain cultivation in the ancient Near East was, perhaps, for its fermenting festive possibilities. Historians moving from an anthropomorphic to an Anthropocene perspective (the revolutionary current epoch where humans shape planetary history) are already undertaking new research, including the impacts of peasant drug migrations, industrial drug processing, and modern chemical drug warfare on deforestation, biodiversity, and the socially marginalized growers of drugs. But this direction can also encompass our increasingly intrusive “built environments”: the networks and structures, say, of global port cities that adapted to connect legal or illicit drugs, the material cultures of drug production, or the complex social ecology of segmented urban drug markets and users in the twentieth century.

Finally, the researched history of the “global sixties” is finally coming into its own—as opposed to its anecdotal, partisan, or broadly remembered pasts. Historians will ask in new and rigorous ways how or if the 1960s (and 1970s–’80s, when illicit consumption trends greatly ratcheted up in many parts of the globe) represented the cultural pivot point in modern drug history often imagined. How did rising consumption and trafficking—always so difficult to research—relate to the high modernist project of drug control, then only recently achieved on a world regime scale with the prohibitionist 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs? Did new radically mind-altering drugs like LSD or synthetic mescaline truly transform the culture? How was this rupture or wave felt in faraway places like “Psychedelic Chile”?<sup>47</sup>

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Whatever actually arises ahead in this expansive field, these are exciting times for scholars and readers alike of the “new drug history.”

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### Notes:

(\*) I thank my drug historian colleagues and comrades Haggai Ram, Miriam Kingsberg Kadia, and Isaac Campos for input on this Introduction, and Spencer Austin at Stony Brook and Nancy Toff at OUP for editorial assistance.

(1.) Paul Gootenberg and Isaac Campos, "Towards a New Drug History of the Americas," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 95, no. 1 (2015): 1–35.

(2.) SHAD gradually grew in the 2000s before its recent (2019) adoption by the intellectual gold standard University of Chicago Press, a sure sign of the field's professionalization and expanding scope.

(3.) Over 300 different drugs are banned in the current UN drug conventions, many of them "designer" synthetics covered since the 1980s.

(4.) Addiction remains a highly contested concept in drug history (hence the quotes): Is it primarily biological or pharmacological fact, or significantly shaped by social, political, and cultural factors, and by ever-changing historical or normative definitions of "habits," health, and inebriation? See, for one example, Nancy D. Campbell, *Discovering Addiction: The Science and Politics of Substance Abuse Research* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

(5.) A huge caveat here: the growing analytical separation by the 1990s of the study of "drugs" from historical alcohol (already an established topic among social historians and anthropologists) could be another pivot in tracing the emergence of new drug history. But I've opted to stress, for economy of space, the 1990s convergence of disciplines instead. A different and thornier question is whether such a drugs-alcohol separation is intellectually or policy defensible or sustainable over the long term. For overarching and shifting

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alcohol-tobacco-drugs relationships, see Virginia Berridge, *Demons: Our Changing Attitudes to Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drugs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); or provocatively, David T. Courtwright, "Mr. ATOD's Wild Ride: What Do Alcohol, Tobacco, and other Drugs Have in Common?," *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* 20 (2005): 105–40.

(6.) See, e.g., W. Golden Mortimer, *History of Coca: "The Divine Plant" of the Incas* (1901; repr., San Francisco: Fitz Hugh Ludlow Memorial Library, 1974); Ernst von Bibra, *Plant Intoxicants* (1855; repr., Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1995); Louis Lewin, *Phantastica: Narcotic and Stimulating Drugs* (1923; repr., Rochester, VT: Park St. Press, 1998).

(7.) Gordon Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

(8.) Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hofmann, *Plants of the Gods: Their Sacred, Healing and Hallucinogenic Powers* (1979; repr., Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1992); Alfred Lindesmith, *The Addict and the Law* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965); Howard S. Becker, "Becoming a Marijuana User," in *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, 41–58 (1953; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1963).

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(15.) Jordan Goodman, Paul Lovejoy, and Andrew Sherratt, eds., *Consuming Habits: Drugs in History and Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1995).

(16.) Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Press, 1985); Arjun Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). The anthropological trend was less pronounced in the same year's other (more mainstream medical history inspired) drug collection: Roy Porter and M. Teich, eds., *Drugs and Narcotics in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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(18.) David T. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Berridge, *Demons*.

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(21.) Gootenberg and Campos, "A New Drug History"; Paul Gootenberg, *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Isaac Campos, *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Rudi Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Ryan Gingeras, *Heroin, Organized Crime, and the Making of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Haggai Ram, *Intoxicating Zion: A Social History of Hashish in Mandatory Palestine and Israel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

(22.) Richard Rudgley, *Essential Substances: A Cultural History of Intoxicants in Society* (New York: Kodansha International, 1994); Schultes and Hofmann, *Plants of the Gods*.

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(23.) Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.

(24.) Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*; Joseph F. Spillane, *Cocaine: From Medical Marvel to Modern Menace in the United States, 1884–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

(25.) For example, Robert P. Stephens, *Germans on Drugs: The Complications of Modernization in Hamburg* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

(26.) Stacey Schwartzkopf and Kathyn E. Sampeck, eds., *Substance and Seduction: Ingested Commodities in Early Modern Mesoamerica* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). A new Oxford *Handbook to the History of Consumption* (and still another on food) attests to this wide field.

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(32.) Courtwright, “Mr. ATOD’s Wild Ride”; Courtwright, *Age of Addiction*; cf. Timothy Hickman, “Target America: Visual Culture, Neuroimaging, and the ‘Hijacked Brain’ Theory of Addiction,” *Past and Present* 222, no. 9 (2014): 207–26.

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(34.) E.g., Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade and the Reagan Legacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

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(37.) E.g., Nick Johnson, *Grass Roots: A History of Cannabis in the American West* (Corvallis: University of Oregon Press, 2017).

(38.) See, for one example of drugs in larger historical forces, Peter Andreas, *Killer High: A History of War in Six Drugs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

(39.) See Schwartzkopf and Sampeck, eds., *Substance and Seduction*.

(40.) Thus, the majority of specialists on drugs carefully avoid or reject loose terms like “cartel”; see, e.g., analysis of political scientist Michael Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama: Trafficking and Terrorist Networks, Government Bureaucracies, and Competitive Adaptation* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2007). For nuanced historical study of such criminal structures, see Stephen Snelders, *Drug Smuggler Nation: Narcotics and the Netherlands, 1920-1995* (Manchester UK: Manchester University Press, 2021).

(41.) For a sterling example, see Chris S. Duvall, *The African Roots of Marijuana* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); or shifting narratives in Campos, *Home Grown*; or Rimmer, *Opium's Long Shadow*.

(42.) Benjamin Breen, *The Age of Intoxication: Origins of the Global Drug Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Alexander S. Dawson, *The Peyote Effect: From the Inquisition to the War on Drugs* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Lucas Richert, *Strange Trips: Science, Culture, and the Regulation of Drugs* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2019).

(43.) This neglect of cannabis by serious history is finally changing: see Lucas Richert and James H. Mills, eds., *Cannabis: Global Histories* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2021).

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(44.) E.g., Nancy D. Campbell, *OD: Naloxone and the Politics of Overdose* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2020); David Herzberg, *White Market Drugs: Big Pharma and the Hidden History of Addiction in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), and many others.

(45.) Herzberg, *White Market Drugs*.

(46.) Johnson, *Grass Roots*, and research of Daniel Weimer, April Merleaux, and others on environmental impacts of modern drug wars. For “beer before bread” hypothesis of the Neolithic revolution, see Courtwright summary in *Age of Addiction*, 19–22.

(47.) For Latin America alone, see Eric Zolov, “Introduction: Latin America in the Global Sixties,” *The Americas* 70, no. 3 (2014): 349–62; Patrick Barr-Melej, *Psychedelic Chile: Youth, Counterculture, and Politics on the Road to Socialism and Dictatorship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Valeria Manzano, *The Age of Youth in Argentina: Culture, Politics, and Sexuality from Perón to Videla* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Lina Britto, *Marijuana Boom: The Rise and Fall of Colombia’s First Drug Paradise* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Mike Jay, *Mescaline: A Global History of the First Psychedelic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

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