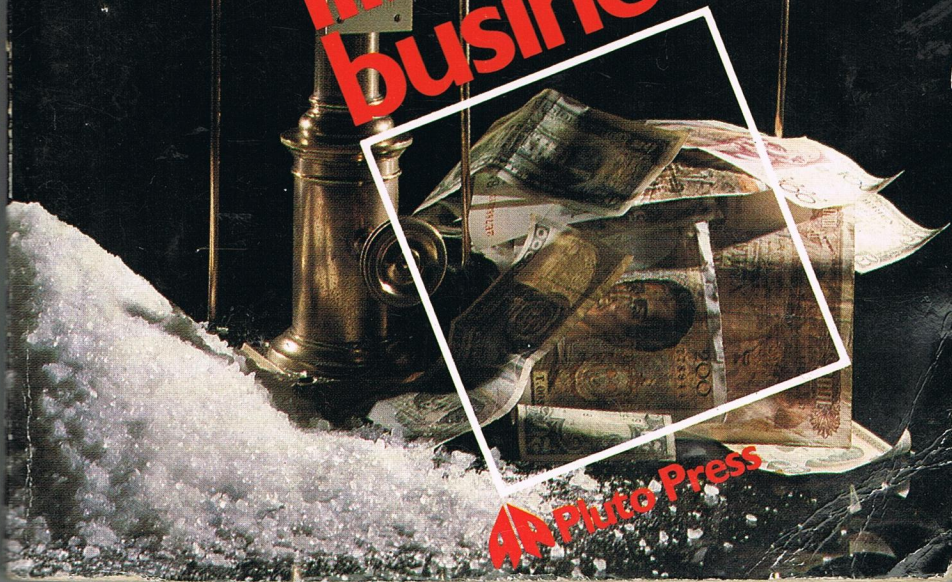


Anthony Henman,
Roger Lewis, Tim Malyon

BIG DEAL

The politics
of the
illicit drugs
business



AA Pluto Press

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Introduction

JUNKIE BARRONS

MERCHANTS

Merchants of death
what else is new?

It seems ludicrous that prides itself on news cutting from 'cocaine orgies' in the press does today. You number of alarmist pieces of heroin addiction. the conservative press caused by cannabis s

Why are these forms do they serve? The misuse of drugs – always growing problem – caused or ignorance, or even truth. There must be precludes serious discussion most information or propaganda – used mainstream of Western the youthful unemployed

We propose to address from a perspective w

5. COCAINE FUTURES

Anthony Henman

1. Meet the Players: An Introduction

You are sitting in a street-side café in Cochabamba, Bolivia, waiting for that break which will really open up the cocaine business to serious scrutiny. Your contact – Guillermo, a member of the city's traditional land-owning elite – is laying down the bullshit, between calls for another round of *Taquiña* beer and the rattle of dice across the table-top: 'Lucho [a small-time cocaine manufacturer] has gone back to using ether . . . he says he prefers the buzz from the fumes. Acetone makes him sick.'

The journalist to whom these words are addressed, not wanting to seem ill-informed, takes up the challenge: 'The problem's not the acetone, but his drying techniques. Lucho's *merca* [from *mercancia*, or 'merchandise'] comes out too compacted. It's got too many lumps in it.'

So? A bearded sage, later to be identified as a sociologist, hears their words and springs to the defence of local industry: 'Give Lucho a break. It's good to see someone still using ether these days, what with all the pressure on supplies. As for the drying, it depends on whether he's got those 200-watt light bulbs installed yet.'

You wonder: how is it that these three characters all

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know so much about one small and apparently insignificant cocaine lab? Could this be a deliberate send-up for your benefit? Across the table, an American with the glazed eyes of a remittance man from California listens in on the esoterica of cocaine manufacture with obvious interest. You suppose that anyone so laid-back would have to be here in the capacity of a user/buyer of some discrimination, anxious to pick up points of style that will lend him a certain status on returning home. But you notice also that the polite formality shown towards him by the local luminaries is tempered by not a little nervousness. Every American is not only a potential buyer. He is also a potential nark.

This doesn't, however, prevent him from chipping in: 'Hey, Guillermo, what about that pink flake you were on about yesterday? You reckon it's cooked up yet?' (Mythical overtones, here, as real pink flake is actually pretty rare – a holy grail for errant coke lovers.) 'Toot sweet, *sí señor*,' replies Guillermo, employing a little mock deference.

As he springs to his feet, you reflect on the social ironies underlying this brief exchange. Guillermo, the faded aristo with a strong suit in downward mobility ('our family estates were taken over by the peasants in the land reforms of the 1950s') can also lay on a bit of nationalist resentment as a sop to his less exalted countrymen. Together they can detest *yanquis* for their economic and political stranglehold over the continent, and righteously defend the cocaine industry as Bolivia's only way out of its current crisis. Equally, they can bad-mouth their major buyers for a brash philistinism and lack of grace matched only by the Brazilian *nouveaux riches* – significantly, their number-two market, and poised perhaps to take the lead. Not least, they can take the piss out of all and sundry in a

subtle way, providing confusing and contradictory accounts of cocaine prices and qualities, and laying deliberate red herrings in the path of potential narcs and interlopers of any stripe.

After a brief absence, Guillermo returns, his features lit up with a big smile which says that he has scored: 'Not the pink, but something we connoisseurs prefer.' He proceeds with a detailed account of how flake cocaine – with its long, fish-scale crystalline structure – is actually a devil of a nuisance to chop up into the requisite fine dust. Indeed, on withdrawing to the privacy of the gents, you are soon poring over a dull, yellowish powder quite lacking in the glint and glitter which flash magazines would have you believe is the sign of the Real Thing. 'This cocaine,' pontificates Guillermo, 'has been intentionally *under-refined*, and then crystallized out with very great care, which requires the services of an expert chemist. The yellow tint shows that there are still impurities in it – other alkaloids like hydrine. This gives you a more rounded high.'

Thank you, Guillermo.

It is worth considering what lessons can be drawn from this type of encounter, repeated in countless cafés the length and breadth of South America. That the finer points of quality should attract so much obsessive attention from users and dealers is perhaps understandable, but why is there such a lack of seriousness in examining the wider impact of the cocaine business on local societies? With a few – very few – honourable exceptions, media and scientific output on the question has noticeably failed to break any really new ground. Most accounts limit themselves to one or more of the following elements: pious rhetoric about the drug

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'problem' backed up by questionable medical data; alarm at the evident corruption produced by the illicit traffic, combined with political sniping at rival interest groups; and, quite often, a liberal mixture of superficial anecdotal material ('How I failed to interview the great cocaine king . . .') designed to provide street credibility and the flavour of real involvement in the scene. Why is this formula so pervasive?

One explanation, suggested by James Dunkerley in a recent political history of Bolivia,¹ is that 'the world in which cocaine is fabricated, transported and marketed is obscure, resistant to intrusion and, as a consequence, prone to description that employs exaggerated hyperbole and the most grotesque conspiracy theories'. While not denying that hyperbole and conspiracy theories do exist aplenty, it could be argued that the root cause of this lies less in the opacity of the coke scene itself than in the intellectual vices of the majority of its observers.

Shying away from direct, personal contacts with the business, many accounts seem happy to base themselves exclusively on second-hand material: press cuttings, official statements, interviews with leading bureaucrats. In the place of concrete, historical realities – albeit observed with the inevitable distortions and inconsistencies of the participant view – we are presented with the monolithic 'objectivity' of official information sources. The 'truth' so established amounts, in essence, to a constant reformulation of certain stock themes – a renewed representation of previous representations, a never-ending progression of mirror images to the vanishing point where they clearly become *misrepresentations*.

This process had undoubted attractions for particular interest groups, who thus perpetuate a mythology of the

illicit drug business which is as self-serving as it is inaccurate. Our quartet in the café in Cochabamba is a case in point: Guillermo's key role in the local scene depends above all on his privileged position of access to information generated within the trade. At the same time, his instinct leads him to exercise a certain discretion in matters relating to the economic wellbeing of his own operation, and that of the business as a whole. All information on prices, quality standards, supply routes and export initiatives is carefully screened, along with vital details such as the names of his protectors in high places. A few gems – news of an unique product, or of a particularly good price – are carefully released to his clients to indicate his expertise. His input into the mythology is that of the discriminating connection, the leader in market trends.

The other members of the group cultivate Guillermo for this kind of information, since it is a commodity more valuable than any amount of pink flake. Assuming, for the moment, that the American is in fact an undercover Drugs Enforcement Agency (DEA) operative, his interest will be in the sort of 'intelligence' which can be used to carry out seizures and arrests, to stem corruption and to pressure local governments. By its very nature, this intelligence will also undergo a screening process before being released to the public. Certain elements will be maintained as operational secrets, while others will be fed strategically into the world's information networks in order to achieve particular ends. This process of news management – determined by the political interests of the Western powers – thus further distorts the already partial view of the business provided by Guillermo and the other direct participants.

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The journalist, on the other hand, is obliged by the nature of his profession to look for aspects of the business which will grab the attention of his readers. Sensational statistics, inflated financial estimates, scoop interviews and salacious scandals, blood-curdling busts and shoot-outs, are the standard fare of the media when dealing with cocaine. Serious investigative journalists (such as Gené)² may attempt to derive their information at first hand from dealers and local narcotics agents, but the vast bulk of what is published in newspapers worldwide has its origin in the big American press syndicates, when not directly in the DEA or the United States Information Agency (USIA). Needless to say, this only serves to perpetuate an extremely distorted and untrustworthy version of events.

We are left, then, with the historians and social scientists, whose general lack of imagination on the subject is underpinned by the fact that they usually situate themselves at the very end of this chain of misinformation. Working from dubious press sources and partial or biased official documents, it is not surprising that so little memorable material has yet been produced within the walls of academe. Field research of the participant/observer kind is virtually precluded by the difficulty in obtaining institutional support for what is perceived as an area of illegality. Equally, the conventions of scientific discourse stifle the emergence of a combative style of scholarship equal to the task of punching holes in the bombast of the anti-drugs campaigns.

Independent observers, however, should be able to confront the situation of near monopoly enjoyed by the official spokesmen on the illicit drugs trade. There is a clear need for some original and challenging polemic, one which reflects with greater honesty the perception of the

real participants in the scene – the users, dealers and peasant producers – and which bases itself on a methodology of unsponsored and uncompromised research. Only in this way can it become sufficiently detached from the vested interests of the moment and actually chronicle the current changes. The moment is now; for in the case of South America, it is becoming evident that what we are witnessing is a major transformation of the economy, the onset of a new phase which will be known in future textbooks as the ‘cocaine cycle’. It can be hoped that as cocaine ‘comes in from the cold’, knowledge and information on the subject is no longer limited to press releases of the DEA which clearly reflect a vested interest.

2. Cocainism: The Highest Form of Imperialism?

Creating a drug problem

While not denying that certain individuals do manage to get strung out on relatively unhealthy coke habits, it is clear that the purely medical aspects of the question have been given a quite disproportionate public emphasis. Disproportionate in comparison to the numerous intoxications produced by legal drugs and industrial pollutants, but disproportionate, also, to the immense human suffering produced as the result of the ‘war on drugs’. Certain authors (notably Szasz)³ have analyzed the ritual persecution of drug users and dealers in terms of a systematic scapegoating of certain deviant groups by an all-powerful medical establishment. Lest anyone think that this phase of pseudo-sanitary ‘concern’ has passed into history, consider the words of Edwin Corr, US Ambassador to Bolivia, in August 1984: ‘One should look

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