

Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Das Paradies, der Geschmack und die Vernunft. Eine Geschichte der Genussmittel. (Paradise, Taste and Reason. A History of Stimulants). Hanser: Munich and Vienna, 1980. Pp. 247. DM39.80, hardcover. Ullstein: Frankfurt a.M., Berlin and Vienna, 1983. Pp. 247. DM12.80, paperback.

Two centuries ago, the German historian August Ludwig Schlözer remarked: "The invention of spirits, along with the arrival of tobacco, sugar, coffee and tea in Europe, has doubtless caused revolutions in our part of the world as great as or even greater than the defeat of the invincible Armada, the Spanish War of Succession, the Peace of Paris, etc." (A. L. Schlözer's Briefwechsel 8 (1781), p. 93; cf. Hans Medick in Klassen und Kultur (Frankf. a.M., 1982), p. 174.)

Wolfgang Schivelbusch deals with this revolution, its causes and ramifications. It should be made clear from the start: this book is a rather peculiar mixture of science, popular-science and essay. But it nevertheless deserves our attention; it is a witty study full of ideas, observations and conjectures that may prove fruitful for further research.

Schivelbusch's basic question concerns itself with the role played by drugs and stimulants in modern man's genesis. And his general thesis reads: the processes induced by stimulants in the human organism chemically completed developments already underway in mentality, culture and politics. (p.12)

To demonstrate this basic assumption, Schivelbusch covers a wide range of mainly German and English history:

- spices and the beginning of modern times
- coffee and the Protestant ethic
- chocolate, Catholicism and the Ancien Regime
- the dry drunkenness of tobacco
- the Industrial Revolution and spirits
- the rituals of drinking
- the commercialization of the tavern
- the new drugs of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Hence quite a few subjects in only 247 pages; surprisingly, however, the temperance movement is not included in this list. But it would be unfair to judge the book by rigid academic standards (although you will find it in many scholarly libraries in Germany).

Schivelbusch adopts a "holistic" standpoint in the discussion of the role of alcohol in history. He stresses not only the dependent relationship between drugs and society but also the interaction between different drugs through time.

For instance coffee is introduced as the "great soberer," the drug of the intellectually productive bourgeois. That is to say the use of coffee is not a mere result of colonialism but of changing attitudes and needs. So the rise of coffee is not explainable without considering the rise of distilled spirits, and the decline of spices and beer. "Spirits are the pharmacological and social inversion of coffee" (p.164). Alcohol was slowly domesticated in the middle classes, whereas heavy drinking became a symbol of belonging to the lower class. The latter drank more and more spirits instead of fermented beverages.

Spirits meant an acceleration in the consumption of ethanol just as the factory meant an acceleration in the production of commodities. In the further course of development, beer became the good and spirits the evil alcohol--not only a symbol of the poor but also of the dark side of capitalism and modern times. The distinction between good and bad alcohol originated from the 18th century gin-epidemic in England (cf. Hogarth's famous Beer Street and Gin Lane); especially in Germany, where teetotalism always remained an objective of sectarians, this view dominated the discussion inside the labor movement until the turn of the century.

Although the work lacks an explicit theoretical framework, it seems obvious that the acceptance of one drug is strongly related to the rejection of another. Drugs and stimulants form a certain constellation, fitting into and reflecting a certain constellation of society. This may seem to be a kind of crude functionalism in which there is no room for traditional and accidental moments, and his construction of ideal types hardly corresponds with the standards of modern social history, but by going into detail, Schivelbusch often succeeds in showing subtle relationships and transformations (e.g. the evolution of the Anglo-American tavern to a place of accelerated circulation of alcohol and money; in contrast to the backward German pub, in the 19th-century Gin-Palaces the bar became the assembly-line of a drinking mill). In doing this the author skillfully utilizes a number of excellent pictures.

Of course there is more conjecture than proof. His sources are rather poor. Schivelbusch drew extensively from solid but dated works on the history of civilization. In many cases the use of the literature is unsatisfactory. This inevitably leads to some errors. To mention only three of them: the strict assignment of certain drugs to each social class is in accordance with contemporary prejudices but not with empirical data. The terms stimulants (Genussmittel) and addiction (Sucht) are used without recognizing their fundamental semantic changes in the 18th century. The assumption of a correlation between the dramatic increase in the consumption of spirits and the Industrial Revolution (i.e. mechanization) is somewhat misleading, in fact gin flooded London just before the take-off, a consequence of pre-industrial pauperism.

The bibliography is a bit annoying because it does not include all of the literature and sources used by the author.

To sum up: Despite its weaknesses Schivelbusch's history of stimulants and drugs is a useful contribution as well as being anything but dull reading, for laymen and specialists alike. It offers the former a general--if not unproblematic--overview, it may serve the latter as food for thought--or even as a quarry for new hypotheses.

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