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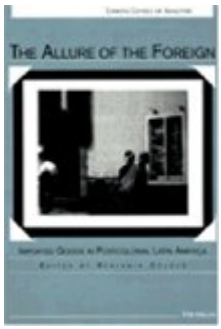

Benjamin Orlove, ed.. *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997. viii + 226 pp. $42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-472-10664-6.

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One of the drawbacks of the standard geographical organization of the historical discipline (broadly defined to include economic history and historical anthropology and sociology) is that scholarship about those regions considered peripheral to Europe and the United States is little read outside of its own subfield. This isolation occurs despite the fact that such scholarship is often heavily influenced by the themes and concerns (and even the methodologies) of the dominant fields in the discipline. Not surprisingly, this unbalanced relationship impacts even the narrative content of regional studies, with primacy often automatically accorded to those historical events which specifically connect the periphery to the "center."

This volume edited by Benjamin Orlove, on a topic- the import of European goods into Latin America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries- which lends itself easily to a Eurocentric analytical focus, works hard to avoid this pitfall. Moreover, this volume offers all scholars interested in the political and domestic economies of consumption an innovative methodological model to follow, one which seamlessly interweaves the work of historians and anthropologists as well as the standard economic history narrative of the postcolonial Latin American economy with a theoretically informed cultural analysis. The introduction to the volume, written by Orlove (an anthropologist) and Arnold Bauer (an historian) begins with the explicit claim that their project is committed to paying "attention to internal social factors" in explaining the "varied responses to European goods" in Latin America and other parts of the pre-industrial world (p. 1). Their goal is not to reject outright the old export-centered interpretation of Latin American development, but rather to balance it with an understanding of the "partially autonomous" nature of imports and consumption (p. 7). In particular, they want to highlight the important role played by consumption (whether of imports, domestic imitations, or "native" products) in the shaping of new national identities and the establishment and legitimation of social hierarchies within that national experience.

While not all of the individual contributions to this volume live up to the high standards set in the introduction, several are particularly interesting and worth highlighting here. Not surprisingly, the substantive chapter by Orlove and Bauer on the consumption of foreign wine, hot beverages, and houses (in fact building materials and architectural design) in Chile during the Belle Epoque nicely demonstrates the principles they set forth at the outset. They do not discount the importance of macro-economic forces in their account of the spread (and ultimate imitation) of these foreign goods. Nonetheless, they focus their discussion on the twin issues of European goods as "status markers" and as signs of "modernity" (pp. 116, 118). They employ both quantitative and qualitative data to tease out what they call the "contradictory pressures to use goods to demonstrate national distinctiveness and global commonality- a contradiction that expressed itself in a tension between national and cosmopolitan styles" (p. 116).

The chapter by Erick Langer on the distribution and meaning of foreign cloth imports among the Chiriguanos in the Lowland Frontier of Bolivia uses very limited source materials in an impressively creative way. His work challenges many of the standard assumptions regarding the interaction between Western goods and indigenous peoples, most notably that the latter are slow to adapt and change, and that consumption of the former will evolve in a linear (progressive) way from little use to greater dependence. He documents convincingly that in the initial period of frontier contact between the Chiriguanos and mestizo ranchers power resided disproportionately with the former; and moreover, that that power was parlayed into significant consumption of highly desired European textiles. It was only with the development of the encroaching cattle economy, the rise of a functioning labor market for nearby Argentine sugar plantations, and the mining boom which put financial resources into the hands of the Bolivian state, that the Chiriguanos lost their command over imports and saw serious reductions in their standard of living. Langer's analysis of this development in reverse is equally sensitive to issues of ethnography, political power, and neoclassical economics.

Finally, the chapter by Josiah Heyman on the changing meaning of import consumption along the Mexico-United States border between the Porfirian 1880s and 1890s and the present is worth noting separately. Using government import statistics, household inventories, and extensive field interviews, Heyman develops a richly nuanced description of the cultural meanings attached to a variety of U.S.-made goods, as well as to the retail sources for those goods. Most importantly, he documents the changing nature of those meanings over time, even in some cases among the same individuals. This leads him to the provocative conclusion that "neither the meaning of nationhood nor of import is constant" (p. 180); followed by the suggestion that the meanings of standards of living may also vary greatly across different political contexts. This is certainly rich food for thought for economic historians, many of whom are deeply committed to the enterprise of assessing past standards of living.

In short, this is a book worth reading beyond the immediate circle of scholars whose work focuses on the development of the Latin American economy and polity. Much of the source material, and the strong commitment to cultural analysis found in this volume will not be overly familiar to economic historians. But many of the questions raised, and the evidence presented to answer them, make an important contribution to areas of inquiry of long-standing interest to economic historians.

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