

## Smuggling, Police, and Empire: Michael Kwass's *Contraband* and the History of Consumption

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Hello! As I think you all know, I am Rebecca Spang, Director of the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Indiana University, and it's a very great pleasure for me to welcome you to this discussion and celebration of Michael Kwass's *Contraband* which has been awarded this year's Kenshur Prize for the best book in our field. The Center has been awarding a book prize since 2008 and this event has really become one of the highlights of our year. What I want to do now is to make a few introductory comments about our speakers and then a few slightly longer comments about the book. Then—lest I forget—we will have the formal giving of the prize, followed by more comments and discussion.

Let me first introduce my fellow commentators and thank them for serving on the Kenshur Prize Committee with me this year. Helen F. Thompson is Associate Professor of English and Director of Graduate Studies at Northwestern University, where she is also affiliated with the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program. She has a B.A. from Amherst College in English **and** Chemistry; a masters from Johns Hopkins; and her PhD from the English Department at Duke University. Her first book, *Ingenuous Subjection: Compliance and Power in the 18<sup>th</sup>-cy Domestic Novel* read social contract theory alongside novels of domesticity to trace the political, philosophical, and generic significance of feminine compliance. Praised by Cora Kaplan as “brilliant and persuasive,” the book was also called “significant and much-needed” by Deidre Lynch and has whet everyone's appetite for Helen's next book, *Fictional Matter: Empiricism, Corpuscles, and the Novel* to be published next year by Penn.

Fritz Breithaupt, known to most of you, is Professor of Germanic Studies here at Indiana University, where he is also affiliated with the Comparative Literature Department and the Cognitive Science program. He has published on an extraordinary range of topics, from empathy and Goethe's politics of perception, to money and the most recent book (at least, I think this is the most recent one!) on the “culture of the excuse” which came out a few years ago with Suhrkamp. At the same time, Fritz is an exemplary citizen of this campus, having served in the past as Acting Director of this Center, Interim Dean of the Honors College, Director of West European Studies, and—now—as Chair of his Department.

The winner of the Kenshur Prize for books published in 2014 is Michael Kwass, Professor of History at Johns Hopkins University. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Michael did his PhD at the University of Michigan with David Bien, and taught at Yale and the University of Georgia before moving to Hopkins in 2011. Michael writes major, field-changing works. His first book, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France* (published by Cambridge) drew attention to the role of elite opposition to tax reform in radicalizing French society and was awarded the Society for French Historical Studies' Pinkney Prize for the best book in French history. His article, “Consumption and the World of Ideas: Consumer Revolution and the Moral Economy of the Marquis de Mirabeau” published in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, won an Honorable Mention for the Clifford Prize—that's the ASECS Prize for best article—in

2004 and I also want to make sure you are aware of the article he published in the *American Historical Review* in 2006: entitled “Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France” it manages to be simultaneously deeply researched, witty, and historiographically significant.

We are here today, however, to talk about *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Harvard University Press, 2014). This is a remarkable book (as two other prize committees have also already concluded). In it, Michael moves from sites where the eighteenth century’s new consumer goods were produced (tobacco and sugar in the American colonies; calico in India) to where they were consumed (cities, towns, villages, and hamlets all over Europe) to craft a book that makes major contributions to scholarship on criminal justice, the Old Regime French state, and the history of consumption. He does this by focusing on the heretofore largely ignored question of *distribution* and by insisting (rightly) that “the globalization of Western European consumption from 1650 to 1800 did not take place in a political vacuum.” How could it, when the French state in this period declared a royal monopoly on the import and sale of tobacco and (for a time) strictly prohibited the import of printed cotton cloth from India? This attempt at creating a new source of royal income (and protecting French textile producers) was partly successful: at the end of the Old Regime, for instance, the tobacco monopoly yielded over seven percent of French state revenues. Yet these same measures had the unintentional effect of creating an enormous “shadow economy” in smuggled goods. Michael estimates that it employed over a million men, women, and children—something like 5% of the French population. We know about the the trade in “underground” and “forbidden” books from Robert Darnton and his students, but contraband salt, calico, and tobacco were actually much more common. It is with this last—and especially with the manhunt launched against one famous smuggling gang in French Savoy (the “Wild East”)—that *Contraband* is especially concerned.

Why does this story matter? In the interest of time, I will suggest just four answers to this question.

1. Because we now finally have a history of consumption and of the intersection of eighteenth-century political and economic life that is about ordinary people. These have been lively fields for the past two decades, but they have been dominated by studies of exceptional individuals (be it Elizabeth Shackleton’s careful parceling out of her hand-me-downs or the “thought” of Adam Smith, Condorcet, et. al.).

2. Because the French Farmers-General—the tax farmers charged with running the royal tobacco monopoly and collecting taxes from it—looked none-too-kindly on the infringement of its privileges and decrease in its income caused by smuggling. Of the Farm’s nearly 30,000 employees, two-thirds of them were armed guards—a paramilitary force that eventually stopped at nothing to capture the most notorious smuggler of all, Louis Mandrin.

3. Because as the scale of production, consumption, and illicit distribution grew, so too did that of enforcement. In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, special courts judged roughly 500 cases of supposed smuggling every year (more than one a day). Of those, something like 20% ended in death sentences. In other words, over a 60 year period, 6000 people were executed for smuggling. If these numbers are small beside those for the U.S. “war on drugs”—currently, something over a million arrests every year—they nonetheless arise from a similar logic.

4. Because when philosophes criticized the Old Regime, they all—even “moderates” like Montesquieu—singled out the institution of the Farmers-General and the punishing of smugglers with death as barbarous elements. Popular revolt combined with these demands for reform and had the effect of fully politicizing the shadow economy. I could go on. But I won’t. And I could ask questions. But I will save those for later. For now, I simply want to ask all of you to join me in congratulating Michael Kwass on writing another superb book.