Vivid History: Kwass's *Contraband* and the Good/Bad Eighteenth Century

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Recommending Michael Kwass's *Contraband* to a friend, I realized that his history could be praised in terms taken from David Hume. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume offers an appraisal of the mental state of "belief" that pivots on why we credit history (though not present to witness it). Hume suggests: "Belief is somewhat more than a simple idea. 'Tis a particular manner of forming an idea: And as the same idea can only be vary'd by a variation of its degrees of force and vivacity; it follows . . . that belief is a *lively idea*" (*Treatise*, 97, emphasis added). In countless profound and surprising ways, Kwass's book meets the Humean criterion of "vivacity" as the condition for ideas that stimulate belief in history. Bracketing for a moment the high stakes of the revision to which belief in Kwass's history leads, I want to affirm the vividness with which he brings to life not only the exploits of the smuggler Louis Mandrin but also the regional, national, and global contexts in which Mandrin's acts assumed meaning. To cite one very concrete example, Kwass transforms how we see the map of eighteenth-century France and its neighbor Savoy: these are not statically delineated territories but zones subject to fiscal regulation whose manifest arbitrariness enhances how vividly we appreciate their perviousness to contraband. Expanding outward to a globalizing market at the same time that it turns inward to motivate the intensive—or, from the vantage of a scholar of Britain, crazy—fiscal discipline exacted by late ancien régime France, Kwass's book likewise vivifies the map of the eighteenth-century world.

To try to gloss the broad stakes of Kwass's study is to risk stilling the liveliness of not only its description but also its argument. Nevertheless, I can begin by saying that the stakes are high, not only for the French Revolution and its political antecedents but for a host of concomitant historical developments, cultural institutions, and historiographical ways of thinking. Most notable among these is the consumer revolution, which Kwass promises both to globalize and to extirpate from Whiggish narratives of polite commercial progress. Even the arguably most idealized byproduct of the rise of consumer society—the emergence of a so-called bourgeois public sphere of rational debate—is refracted across Kwass's account of the "parallel illicit economy" that exists as the very product of an "emergent global" market (42). Criminal contraband and its attendant violence—and, in Mandrin's case, also its attendant close simulacrum of licit exertions of fiscal power—is not, Kwass shows us, the stark antagonist but rather the flip side of a rising Enlightenment fueled by global commerce. As one major historiographical refinement driven by Kwass's vivification of omnipresent smuggling, we discover that the genealogy of carceral discipline written by Michel Foucault may be a bit too bloodless. Aimed, literally, at crushing smugglers who violated the General Farmers' prerogative, the eighteenth-century convergence of French absolutism's military and fiscal authority anticipates "the modern French prison system" but remained unacknowledged by Foucault (234). In Kwass's account, the origins of modern discipline reach back to Chesapeake Bay tobacco production, are sustained in France as enforcement of the state monopoly on the leaf and—in a decisively anti-Whiggish turn—wind up enslaving consumers of slave labor by sending convicted traffickers to toil in galleys and penal camps.

Turning to Kwass's most topical intervention, we encounter a French Revolution whose motivation has been re-centered: still a reaction against arbitrary power, to be sure, but

launched on July 12 by the destruction of new, contraband-busting walls around the city of Paris rather than by the storming of the Bastille two days later. The former heralds the National Assembly's more ambivalent embrace of populist calls for an end to indirect taxation of consumer goods and the accompanying repressive apparatus, an ambivalence that would be proved by the early nineteenth-century restitution of the hugely lucrative tobacco monopoly. What is most persuasive about this revised vantage on revolution is the force with which Kwass defends the political significance of Mandrin's short-lived but astonishing career. While Mandrin's highly performative flouting of fiscal law did not in any strict sense catalyze revolution, Kwass shows that the smuggler's incursion into the state-controlled tobacco and calico market was political to its core. By imposing contraband on state distribution outlets—infusing trafficked goods into the licit market by forcing low-level agents to buy them at gun- or sword-point—Mandrin challenged indirect taxation all the way up to the king. (Indeed, as Kwass reminds us, Mandrin left receipts that stuck the Farm with the bill.) Through Mandrin's life and his multi-media afterlives, and through the pre-revolutionary discourses of political economy and penal reform, Kwass shows how thoroughly Mandrin politicized the underground market. Perhaps more than anything, Kwass vivifies the moral logic of Mandrin's acts—which included selective excarceration of prisoners convicted of dealing in contraband—to stress the persistent failure of economic transgression, in minds both high and low, to register as crime.

The dubious criminality of traffic in contraband contributed to Mandrin's near mythic status during his lifetime and continues through the present day. To begin to formulate a question that is more meta-historical than properly historical, I return to a gloss of the micro-historian Giovanni Levi offered by Kwass to qualify the agency of everyday people: they occupy an "oxymoronic realm of heavily constrained freedom, where the mental faculties of the individual confront mighty but not quite omnipotent social structures and norms" (13). The genuine thrill of Mandrin's exploits, which resonate with today's theoretically informed approximations of "heavy constrained freedom" at the same time that they invite us to imagine what their eighteenth-century reception by an overtaxed people might have been, lead me to ask how or in what register this story first spoke to you [Kwass], the author? Not to bifurcate the micro- and macro-histories so cogently interwoven by the book, but I am curious to hear the history of your history. In other words: what brought you to this project initially, the "small" story of Mandrin's biography or the "big" story of taxation and smuggling? Can you speak to how access at either of these points led you to articulate the stakes of the project at its opposing scale?

This question speaks, I hope, to the relation between what you designate "[t]he happy eighteenth century" and "the sad eighteenth century": the former "optimistic, filled with light and progress," the latter "pessimistic, haunted by darkness and misery" or, even, driven by intensifying expropriation of the poor and escalating Atlantic slavery (359). During my own formation in eighteenth-century British literature (driven in the 1990s by the embrace of Foucault and mixed reception of Jürgen Habermas on the bourgeois public sphere), the sad eighteenth century served all too often as either redundant or countervailing evidence still eccentric to the proof it served: vis-à-vis Foucault, that imperceptible disciplinary power does finally recur to really terrible ends, or vis-à-vis Habermas, that the abstract sphere of public opinion upholds a normatively disembodied ideal at the cost of other, embodied and excluded persons. I do not mean to minimize these debates, but they engage the "good" eighteenth century as a still coherent abstraction punctured by the discrete bogeyman (or bogeywoman)

of the "bad" eighteenth century. Your treatment of contraband seems more finely to fuse, or confuse, good and bad sides, literally to populate the century with actors who move in-between: "Those excluded from the fruits of the century's economic growth proved to be essential links in the commodity chains that buttressed consumption during the Enlightenment" (359). Along with chains and links, there is no more apt figure than smuggling itself to evoke the confusion of good and bad sustained by your book. With the question of how micro led you to macro or vice-versa, can you also speak to how you would articulate the nature of the connection between "good" and "bad", whether it solicits a word like "dialectical" or something quite other, and how you feel such an articulation might most powerfully inflect historical methods for study of this period?

Finally, I cannot resist a question that I suspect has been asked before. At key points you invoke the American war on drugs as testimony not to Foucaultian discipline but to contemporary class- and race-based "discrimination": the drug war's repressive, arbitrary, and morally ambivalent anti-trafficking laws reflect "an invention of the modern state that in many ways is still with us" (249). To be brief, I would like to know: what specifically would you say your book helps us see about the war on drugs? In the eighteenth century context, you show the deep inter-reliance of licit and illicit economies, the role of repression in the emergence of state power, and the domestic repercussions of global commodity flows. What specific aspects of America's prosecution of the drug war does Mandrin bring into most urgent critical focus?

As somebody finishing a book on corpuscular chemistry and the novel, I nominate as my favorite Farmer (if we can admit such a category!), the so-called father of modern chemistry: Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier. He appears by name twice in Kwass's history, to denounce retailers who adulterate Farm tobacco with various additives and, more damningly, to promote the "new outer wall" around Paris that became the locus of revolutionary rage (327). But in fact Lavoisier surfaces three times: he stood fourth in line among the nineteen Farmers guillotined for conspiracy against the French people in May 1794 (Poirier, *Lavoisier*, 379). With this dénouement, good and bad sides of Enlightenment converge inexorably once more. It is testimony to the Humean force of Kwass's book that contraband transmutes good and bad into one indelible history.

Works Cited

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