Reflections on *Contraband*: What a Smuggler Can Teach Us about Writing Eighteenth-Century Global History

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I am thrilled and deeply honored to receive this year's Kenshur prize, and would like to thank Rebecca Spang and the other members of the prize committee (Fritz Breithaupt and Helen Thompson, for all the time and effort they put into the selection process). I currently serve on a prize committee for the American Historical Association and am keenly aware of the enormous amount of work that such service requires. Thank you all for your tireless efforts, and thanks to everyone else for coming out at 4:00 on a Friday afternoon to talk about the eighteenth century.

As is customary, I'll begin by reading page ninety-nine of my book:

> The exact relationship between nobles and their trafficking underlings was not always clear. Did nobles simply look the other away or were they actively involved in the illicit commerce? A case from Normandy suggests that some gentlemen were actually running the show from behind the scenes. In the town of St. Lo, a nobleman named Adigard imported fraudulent tobacco from the Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey, milled it in his manor house, and had his valet and a local dressmaker fill thousands of paper packets with snuff, which were then delivered under the cover of night to a corrupt local tobacco receiver with whom he split the profits. The receiver frequently dined at the nobleman's manor, making deals in "hushed tones" so the domestics did not hear.

This passage comes from Chapter Four, which sketches the underground economy in eighteenth-century France. As you can see, this was a robust illicit economy that drew men and women from across the social spectrum, including the nobility. Peasants did most of the heavy lifting—and ran the most risk of getting caught—but nobles, clerics, and merchants also wheeled and dealed behind the scenes.

Before I go on to describe the illicit economy, I would like to discuss the principal methodological and historiographical interventions my book seeks to make. What follows, therefore, is a sort of meta-analysis of *Contraband*.

Methodologically, the book aims to do two things. First, it seeks to play with scale, both geographical and temporal. Geographically, it embeds a microhistory of a famous eighteenth-century smuggler named Louis Mandrin in a broader history of globalization. In so doing, it suggests a connections among the rise of world trade, the political development of France, and the life of Mandrin. Moving between scales made writing the book a real challenge. When do I zoom in to tell Mandrin's personal story (his childhood, his descent into crime, his career as a smuggler, his execution, and his afterlife as a legendary folk hero)? When do I zoom out and provide national, regional, and global context (such as the rivalry among European states; European expansion into Asia, Africa, and the Americas; and the growth of world trade)? How do I draw connections between these different levels of scale? These were explicit questions I asked myself. The temporal scale I play with is mostly implicit. The parallels between eighteenth-century underground trade and today's "war on drugs" are striking: this is what drew me into the project in the first place. I did not want to force the comparison, but I do think it is important to maintain a dialogue between past and present, between the eighteenth century where I work and the twenty-first century where I live.

Perhaps we can talk about this in the discussion, but I believe this kind of communication between past and present is crucial for the health of eighteenth-century studies as a field.

The second methodological goal was to cut across the disciplines of history, economics, and literature. I wanted to tell a story about eighteenth-century political economy, the lives of ordinary smugglers, and the criminal justice system, but I also wanted to bring out the cultural and intellectual dimensions of the problem of smuggling. By cultural and intellectual dimensions, I mean everything that relates to the making of meaning and the world of ideas. So, I asked: What did global commodities mean to the men and women who consumed them? How did smugglers perceive their trade? How did readers appropriate meaning from the explosion of popular literature on smuggling (a question which raises the tricky problem of reader response)? And how did Enlightenment thinkers such as economists and legal reformers represent smuggling and the crackdown on contraband by the criminal justice system?

When I first started doing research for this book I noticed that the walls between disciplines were formidable (I'm sure Rebecca noticed the same thing when she began her research on money in the French Revolution). Social and economic historians worked on the mechanics of smuggling. Literary scholars worked on representations of criminality. Intellectual historians and philosophers worked on political and economic thought. But none of these people were talking to one another, and because they were not in dialogue they missed the larger eighteenth-century story. By combining these various approaches, I thought we could learn something new about the history of the period. This is what makes the field of eighteenth-century studies so valuable: it encourages scholars to play with different methodologies and cut across fields to provide new perspectives on the period.

So much for methodology. What about historiography? The book's historiographical intervention is relatively simple. It seeks to complicate our understanding of the so-called "consumer revolution" of the eighteenth century. Since the 1980s, historians have discovered that between 1650 and 1800 Europeans were consuming more and more stuff, including clothing, household furnishings, and colonial goods such as sugar, tobacco, tea, coffee, and chocolate. The historians of the consumer revolution made a fascinating discovery: Europe was filling up with goods long before the Industrial Revolution. Before the spread of factory production, the material world of Europe was rapidly expanding.

The literature on the consumer revolution is rich and complex, but I found it frustrating in one respect. It is profoundly apolitical. It depicts a rosy eighteenth century with households cheerfully accumulating more and more goods. My book complicates this picture in two ways. First, it calls attention to the fact that the consumer revolution did not unfold in a liberal free-trade environment. This was not a century of peaceable accumulation. Rather, it emerged in a war-torn age of fiscalism, when rival states sought to fiscalize the consumption and trade of global commodities in an effort to bolster their military power, and mercantilism, when rival states sought to control the flow of colonial goods around the world to the benefit of national economies. In the French case, the royal tobacco monopoly is an excellent example of fiscalism. Louis XIV established a monopoly on the production and trade of tobacco from the Americas as part of a larger effort to strengthen royal finances. Mercantilism, on the other hand, is well illustrated by the calico prohibition, a ban on the production and sale of cotton cloth from India. Here the king wished to protect domestic textile producers from the influx of coveted cloth from Asia.

These fiscal and mercantilist interventions in world trade had the unintended effect of globalizing the underground economy. In France, tobacco and calico flooded the black market, joining older European products like salt. This expansion of underground commerce suggests that there was a dark side to global trade and the consumer revolution it sustained. The second way I complicate overly optimistic depictions of the consumer revolution is to

suggest that the illicit economy had profound political implications. One political implication was rebellion, as the moral disjuncture between royal law and popular culture gave rise to violent cycles of rebellion from below. Mandrin's career illustrates this beautifully. He led a gang of over a hundred armed men (a small private army) and dramatized his attacks on the General Farm (the private company that oversaw the tobacco monopoly and calico ban). Not only did he occupy towns militarily to create open public markets in contraband goods, but he forced agents of the royal tobacco monopoly to purchase his contraband leaf. The publicity or political theater through which Mandrin staged his rebellions suggest he had a relatively sophisticated political consciousness.

The other political consequence of the illicit trade was repression. Faced with a globalizing underground economy, the monarchy massively expanded the criminal justice system. The police force belonging to the General Farm became the largest paramilitary force in Europe. The penal code was hardened as penalties against trafficking were tightened. And new extraordinary courts were created to impose tough new sentences on smugglers. One of these courts, the notorious commission of Valence, would sentence Mandrin to death in 1755.

This vicious cycle of rebellion and repression was further politicized by cultural producers. The violence over smuggling was heavily mediated, and processes of mediation only further politicized the problem. In the realm of popular culture, biographers, songsters, and engravers celebrated Mandrin's triumphs over the Farm. Readers could vicariously experience the violent thrill of trafficking and rebellion, much like viewers today experience the thrill of crime by watching TV shows like "The Wire". The proliferation of such crime literature turned Mandrin into a folk hero—a sort of Gallic Robin Hood—as it both reflected and fueled popular resentment of the Farm.

At a higher socio-cultural level, the issue of smuggling was mediated by the new "science" of Enlightenment political economy. Economists in the intellectual circle of Vincent de Gournay placed the problem of smuggling in a new theoretical context by inventing the concept of consumer sovereignty, which held that the state had no right to interfere with private consumption. It was pure folly to erect barriers between consumers and the goods they desired, for such barriers would only result in useless and inhumane border violence. Alternatively, another group of economists called physiocrats argued that all state interventions in the market violated the natural economic order. Smugglers had a "natural right" to buy and sell goods that had mistakenly been classified as "illegal" by the state. The physiocrats claimed that to regulate or tax such trade was to violate nature itself. Finally, legal reformers like Cesare Beccaria demanded an overhaul of the criminal justice system in order to establish a reasonable proportionality between crime and punishment. It was inhumane and ineffective, he protested, to prosecute smugglers as if they were guilty of morally atrocious crimes.

The mediation of the cycle of violence by popular and Enlightenment writers put tremendous pressure on the French royal state to reform itself. Smuggling was one of a host of public issues that led a crisis of authority in the late eighteenth century and ultimately helped bring about the French Revolution. Smuggling did not cause the French Revolution of course, but it did feed into the course of revolutionary events in interesting ways. For example, the first major collective action of the Revolution was not the storming of the Bastille, as is commonly thought, but the burning of the customs gates on July 12, two days before the Bastille. Smugglers and consumers interested in tax-free goods joined forces to raze the new customs wall that surrounded the capital. Such collective action posed a problem for the National Assembly, which faced fierce attacks on the Farm in Paris and the provinces. Confronted with popular unrest and partially persuaded by the new liberal economics of the Enlightenment, deputies in the Assembly tore down the fiscal and mercantilist institutions that had for decades stimulated the growth of the underground

economy. Absolving the men and women who had attacked the customs gates, the Assembly all but abolished the fiscal-mercantilist regime that had created the "war" between smugglers and the state. In its place, they established a new liberal political order, which would generate its own share of problems as the Revolution proceeded.

If, in the end, my book is the study of a single eighteenth-century life, it is also a history of the larger economic, cultural, and political forces at work in Europe and the wider world that shaped that life. My experiment with what has recently been called "global microhistory" allowed me to use the legendary figure of Mandrin to write a history about large-scale historical problems such as globalization, the rise of European consumption, and the origins and course of the French Revolution. Global microhistory is a wonderfully fruitful way to connect the lived experiences of particular individuals to the dynamic transformations of the eighteenth century.