

Alan L. Karras, *Smuggling: Contraband and Corruption in World History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, inc., 2010), xii + 201 pp., ISBN: 978-0-7425-5316-3

Alan Karras's attempt to write an account of 'contraband and corruption in World History' is laudable in the bravery of its undeniably broad conception, situating itself within the current (particularly American) academic fetish for 'Global History'. In this volume, part of a series entitled 'Exploring World History', Karras attempts to deal with his vast and heterogenous subject area predominantly through making a series of partly thematic generalizations, seldom linked to any specific location or period of time (although it seems that he is usually referring to his own area of interest: the eighteenth-century Caribbean). He illustrates these assertions with a limited number of examples, harvested primarily from the British Library and Public Record Office, although a few come from the French colonial records held at Aix-en-Provence. These examples are then analysed thoroughly and extensively in a manner that pays credit to Karras's skills of source criticism, but can often extend into the twin perils of stating the obvious and sometimes extrapolating maybe a bit far beyond the information the sources actually provide.

Karras's basic argument is that smuggling (again, in its timeless, placeless form) was a crime which divided state from society. As tax evasion, it formed society's response to the exactions of the state and was not viewed by society as a crime. As such, it did not bear the attributes of proper crime, particularly violence, except as a very last resort. Karras's argument here suffers from the over-riding problems of this book: his habit of making broad generalizations without an acceptance that there were specific differences in different times and places for specific reasons. He presents smuggling as a sort of 'social crime' (although this is not a term he uses), a crime functioning as resistance against a social order or, in Karras's case, the exactions of the state, and largely accepted by society as such. In this, he could perhaps consult some of the

historiography depicting eighteenth-century British smuggling as social crime, which for the most part has not been quite as squeamish as Karras about accepting the frequent role of organized crime and gratuitous violence in smuggling.

Moreover, in an argument which rests heavily on drawing a dichotomy between state and society, Karras never really defines what he means by the two, or where he sees the distinction lying; this is a real loss for a subject area which opens up so many interesting avenues in the state vs. society debate. Although Karras does touch on the difficulties caused by those supposed to be enforcing the laws breaking them, perhaps his lack of nuance is caused by the examples he studies: largely cases where a distant imperial government sent out representatives to administer colonies or provinces, so a distinction between representatives of the central state and local communities is easier to see. We have the colonial eighteenth-century Caribbean, 1940s French Indochina, and the 'imperial state' of mid-nineteenth-century China with its Manchu ruling class. Perhaps considering smuggling occurring closer to the metropolis, where the dividing line between state and society is slightly harder to distinguish, might be helpful.

Karras's second chapter is a digression. He states that the problem with the academic study of smuggling is that most people cannot distinguish smugglers from pirates. If this is a problem, the solution seems fairly simple: piracy and smuggling are distinct crimes, but the personnel involved were not always distinct. For instance we have examples of privateers-turned-pirates engaging in smuggling in the eighteenth-century English Channel. Karras tends both to over-complicate and over-simplify his answer. Without ever really defining piracy or smuggling, he asserts that the distinction lies in the personnel involved and the lack of violence in smuggling (both not always true), and the fact that piracy challenges the social order whereas smuggling does not – an assertion which does not fit hugely well with Karras's 'social crime'-type view of smuggling.

Instead of looking further into the assumptions he is making, Karras launches into a discussion of modern-day Somali pirates, a digression within a digression.

Karras is strongest in his third chapter, where he discusses smuggling from the perspective of political economy. His discussion, in broad terms, of the development of what Adam Smith termed ‘the mercantile system’ and its relationship with smuggling is interesting and an example of where a ‘Global History’ perspective works. The subsequent discussion of what various thinkers – from Bentham to Habermas – might have thought of smuggling is less helpful. His extrapolations on what Adam Smith and Marx *might* have said about smuggling often do not quite equate with what they *actually* said on the subject. Karras uses this to launch into the second part of his argument, which he expands on in his last two chapters. Here smuggling provides a sort of safety valve for the public to let off its free trade steam without having to rise in revolution against the state which restricts its freedom to ‘truck, barter, and exchange’, and as such has to some extent been tacitly allowed by states which ostensibly condemn it. This is one of the more thought-provoking ideas of the book, but Karras provides little historical evidence to support it, and indeed some historical states have proved remarkably successful in stamping out smuggling: for example nineteenth-century Britain.

Relatively little serious academic literature on the subject of smuggling has been published, and this attempt to look at the bigger picture is certainly welcome. However, what Karras has produced is rather disappointing: a book which takes a small number of examples, most of which the author is not particularly familiar with, and uses them to produce largely oversimplified generalizations which are ahistorical in the sense that they exist outside any particular time and place or the recognition that differences exist between locations and periods. ‘World

History', despite its best intentions, is often disappointingly vague and hamstrung by the inability of anyone to be an expert in *everything*.

Thomas Hine¹

University of Exeter

¹ Thomas Hine's (tph207@exeter.ac.uk) academic interests are primarily eighteenth-century political and social history, and particularly smuggling in the British Isles during this period. He holds a BA (Hons.) in Ancient and Modern History and an MSt in Modern British and European History (both University of Oxford, 2011 and 2012) and is currently a doctoral student at the University of Exeter. The title of his PhD thesis is (provisionally) 'The Role of Private Enterprise in Eighteenth-Century Smuggling Prevention.'