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Smuggling and Globalization in eighteenth-century Sweden

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Anna Maria Catarina Knutsson, *Smuggling in the North: Globalisation and the Consolidation of Economic Borders in Sweden, 1766–1806* (Florence: European University Institute 2019). 412 s.

Next time you enjoy your first cup of coffee of the day, try, for a moment to empathize with distressed Swedish coffee drinkers, who saw their favorite brew banned multiple times between 1756 and 1822 by royal decree. Would you have been among those prepared to break the law to get their daily fix? Coffee was by no means the only desirable foreign commodity to be declared off-limits in the early modern period. At one time or another in the period covered by this study, silk, printed or dyed cotton cloth, wool and worsted, tea, sugar in various forms, pins, porcelain and several other commodities were banned outright, limited to certain groups or restricted in terms of place of origin.

Smuggling in the North: Globalisation and the Consolidation of Economic Borders in Sweden, 1766–1806, a doctoral thesis recently defended at the European University Institute in Florence, is a detailed study of smuggling into, and to a lesser extent, out of Sweden in the later eighteenth and first decade of the nineteenth century, at the height of the enthusiasm for these kinds of protectionist import controls. As Knutsson shows, many Swedes were, in fact, unwilling to give up their (mostly) small luxuries, and import prohibitions produced a thriving contraband trade, with smugglers taking advantage of Sweden's large territory, varied terrain, and almost unpoliceable borders both by land and by sea. Central to the story Knutsson has to tell were not only a sizeable and very resourceful body of men and women prepared to smuggle, but an even larger number prepared to buy the goods smugglers had to sell.

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The title of Knutsson's thesis might seem to suggest a somewhat narrow study, but that is misleading. It is not just about economic borders, but about the many ways that, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, smuggling made its way into the heart of Swedish culture, economics, politics, social relations, and even foreign policy. Knutsson also successfully locates Sweden and Swedish trade, legal and illegal, within the newest international scholarship on "the consumer revolution", state formation, and globalization. To achieve this feat Knutsson has used court and administrative records from across Sweden proper and Finland, including, most notably, the rich material from the Maritime Customs Courts (Sjötullsrätten) both for Stockholm and elsewhere. She has also consulted manuscript records in France and Great Britain, in addition to making extensive use of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century newspapers, travel narratives, diaries and economic treatises. Moreover, she has sought out some actual, or at least probable smuggled goods from museum collections, and the thesis contains images of seized contraband goods from the period, as well as a number of other useful images, maps and tables that clearly show who smuggled, what they smuggled and how they sought to evade the authorities.

Swedish smuggling in a global context

Chapter 1 deftly situates the thesis within the larger scholarship. Knutsson's methodological inspirations are diverse and go well beyond the Scandinavian literature. Particularly of note is Michael Kwass's influential 2014 study of smuggling in eighteenth-century France which goes a long way toward reconceiving smuggling not just as a national, or even transnational phenomenon, but as a global one.¹ Knutsson is also clearly influenced by the growing number of studies that see globalization as, in her words, "a dynamic interaction between the global and the local levels".² Moreover, the thesis is deeply concerned with the relationship between an emergent state apparatus and attempts to control the flow of goods across borders. The banning or regulating of foreign imports was one of the ways early modern states sought to exert control over both their borders and their populations, in other words, to invent themselves. But that meant that smuggling was a far from trivial issue: it challenged both the centralizing pretensions of the bureaucratic State and its real and symbolic territorial authority. In relation to the Swedish literature, the thesis builds on but also differs from earlier

1. Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, MA 2014).

2. Knutsson (2019) p. 3.

work on Swedish customs officials by Maria Ågren and Maria Cavallin,³ on consumption by Johanna Ilmakunnas, Gudrun Andersson, Mikael Alm and others,⁴ and on long distance trade and shipping by Hanna Hodacs and Leos Müller.⁵ It also updates and at times challenges classic works that deal with smuggling, such as those of Eli Heckscher.⁶

Chapter 2 has good coverage of the push and pull of protectionist versus free trade principles in the thought of 1700s and early 1800s Swedish economic theorists. It also contains a useful discussion of the challenges of enforcement, notably in relation to the on-again, off-again right of "hemfrid", or home-peace, essentially a right not to be disturbed in one's home, including by customs officials in search of contraband goods. There is a particularly fascinating discussion of one Eric Erland Bodell (1774–1848), a customs official stationed first at Uddevalla, then in Stockholm, and finally at Marstrand. In 1800 and 1804 Bodell published translations of parts of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and in 1805 and again in 1815 he penned treatises of his own in which he recorded his growing disenchantment with import restriction, both on principled free trade grounds and as a result of his own experience of the futility of trying to catch smugglers.

Chapter 3 is a rich account of the geographical dimensions of smuggling, with a particular focus on liminal spaces, and the impossible task of actually policing them. The contrast between boreal (forest) borders, the sea (particularly archipelagoes – a nightmare for customs enforcement) and cities is well drawn, with useful accompanying images. The small portraits of smugglers drawn from court proceedings, primarily the above-mentioned Tullrätts domböcker, as well as Reports from the Customs Chambers, "Personella berättelser och anmärkningspunkter", and Travel fiscal reports, "Re-

3. Maria Ågren, *The State as Master: Gender, State Formation and Commercialisation in Urban Sweden, 1650–1780* (Manchester 2017); Maria Cavallin, *I kungens och folkets tjänst: Synen på den svenske ämbetsmannen 1750–1780* (Göteborg 2003).

4. Johanna Ilmakunnas, "The Luxury Shopping Experience of the Swedish Aristocracy in Eighteenth-Century Paris", i Deborah Simonton, Marjo Kaartinen, & Anne Montenach (ed.), *Luxury and Gender in European Towns, 1700–1914* (New York 2015) pp. 115–131; Gudrun Andersson, *Stadens dignitärer: Den lokala elitens status- och maktmanifestation i Arboga 1650–1770* (Stockholm 2009); Gudrun Andersson, "A Mirror of Oneself: Possessions and the Manifestation of Status among a Local Swedish Elite, 1650–1770", *Cultural and Social History* 3:1 (2006) pp. 21–44; Mikael Alm, "Making a Difference: Sartorial Practices and Social Order in Eighteenth-Century Sweden", *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 50:1 (2016) pp. 42–62. See also Charlotta Wolff, *Vänskap och makt: Den svenska politiska eliten och upplysnings-tidens Frankrike* (Helsingfors 2005).

5. Hanna Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North: Scandinavian Trade and the Market for Asian Goods in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (London 2016); Leos Müller, "Kolonialprodukter i Sveriges handel och konsumtionskultur, 1700–1800", *Historisk tidskrift* 124:2 (2004) pp. 2–14.

6. Eli F. Heckscher, *The Continental System: An Economic Interpretation* (Oxford 1922); Eli F. Heckscher, *Sveriges ekonomiska historia från Gustav Vasa* (Stockholm 1935).

sefiskalers rapportör”, are both detailed and fascinating and give a human face to the whole study.

Chapter 4 turns to the retail side of smuggling. First it examines pedlars in the countryside, with a particularly emphasis on “Westgothian pedlars” who dominated the itinerant trade within and across the borders that constitute Sweden today, and “Trading Russians” who moved back and forth with their goods between what is now Finland and Russia. Turning to the towns and cities it covers the so-called “Silk and Cloth Trader Society”, “Siden och Klädes Kramhandels Societeten”, and smugglers within the royal court.

Throughout there is close attention to these retailers’ networks, their customers, and the degree to which they were subject to the law: not so surprisingly there were not many convictions among courtiers. There is a particularly useful and sensitive account of the situation of Jewish traders, some of whom appear to have been smugglers; others of whom were simply convenient scapegoats when a culprit needed to be found.

Chapter 5 discusses two very different types of smuggled goods, worsted (a woollen fabric, much of it manufactured in Norwich, England) and coffee. Smuggled goods are shown to have had a rather surprising cultural impact. Thus smuggled Norwich worsted rather routinely made up a part of Swedish “traditional” costumes, and is today to be seen in many folkdräkt collections; Knutsson supplies some telling examples of this, accompanied by images. She also uses a series of parish debates from 1793 aimed at getting people to limit their buying of foreign cloth, to explore, in a very subtle way, how consumption of foreign goods – many of them banned goods – worked at the local level. With respect to coffee, Knutsson’s painstaking work in the archives shows the intricate interplay between the periodic coffee bans and the rise of coffee-drinking as a central feature of Swedish sociability, seemingly at all levels of society, at least in the cities. She also demonstrates the rather central role of women, both women of the laboring classes, and elite women, in this process.

Chapter 6 deals with smuggling and diplomacy, jumping off from the late István Hont’s notion of the jealousy of trade. In the early modern period smuggling was not just an attack on the state; it was also a weapon by which states sought to enhance their position vis à vis other states. Here Knutsson shows how countries used smuggling as part of a larger competitive strategy, both in relation to pure trade rivalries, and to rivalries that had degenerated into war; as in the rest of the study, she locates smuggling in a thoroughly transnational context without at all sacrificing local detail and complexity.

Gender and Mercantilism

There are, of courses, a few areas where one wished for more. Though there is some attention to materiality, especially in the sections on cloth, one would have liked more discussion of the nature of the demand for these goods, especially in the case of commodities like coffee and sugar which were and are probably habit-forming. There are wonderful discussions of women as consumers of smuggled goods, most notably a section on the "coffee crimes" of women in the 1790s. In almost all cases these were working class women subjected to arrest and fines essentially for having "fika" together. As Knutsson shows, partly through a close reading of noblewomen's diaries, coffee drinking was also a fairly standard feature of elite sociability, including during the periods when coffee was banned; however, elite convictions for coffee-drinking were almost nonexistent throughout the period. While the discussions of women consumers are wonderful, the discussion of women smugglers is slightly less satisfying, especially in the section on smuggling into towns. One would have liked Knutsson to say more about working-class women's experiences with the customs officials, who, in their zeal, frequently resorted to dishonorable methods like body searches. Questions of poor women's personal honor or lack of it might have been a nice foil to the earlier section on hemfrid.

Knutsson has made a choice in this study to avoid the term "mercantilism" and instead to speak of what she chooses to call "patriotic protectionism." In this reviewer's opinion this may overstate the degree of consensus around protectionism – even in Sweden it always had its critics, the remarkable Mr. Bodell being one. However, Knutsson is surely correct to say that the authorities *tried* to equate protectionism with patriotism, and perhaps the name matters less than the debates that currently surround it. The term "mercantilism," after some years in the historiographical wilderness, has recently had a comeback, partly inspired by the very issues to do with the formation of the nation-state in an age of globalization that so captivate Knutsson.⁷ Therefore it is to be hoped that, whether or not she chooses to endorse the word, she will make it a point in future to weigh in on some of the questions these debates have raised.

Anna Knutsson makes a significant contribution to the literature on state formation, trade, consumption and globalization, both theoretically and in terms of content. The study is also very entertaining to read. Moreover, when one compares what she has done for Sweden with the secondary literature on smuggling in England and France, much of the latter with, perhaps, the exception of Kwass and a few other very recent works, tends to

7. See e.g., Philip J. Stern and Carl Wennerlind (ed.), *Mercantilism Reimagined: Political Economy in Early Modern Britain and Its Empire* (Oxford 2013).

look rather parochial by comparison. This study, in short, puts early modern Swedish smuggling on the international map. Even more significantly, it speaks to large issues about how globalization actually worked in practice. Today the focus is often on local resistance to globalization, but the historical record suggests a more complicated picture, with local people going to extraordinary lengths to obtain goods illegally from the Mediterranean, the East Indies, and the Americas, as well as less distant places like the English manufacturing city of Norwich. This thesis is part of a new wave of scholarship that is making hitherto separate and distinct bodies of scholarship speak to one another, and thereby teaching us new things about Scandinavians' place in the world in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.