REVIEW: 'Contraband,' by Andrew Wender Cohen; a lively account of smuggling

Book review: Andrew Wender Cohen uses smuggling as a portal to examine the dominant political issues of the 18th and 19th centuries.

By Glenn c. altschuler Special to the Star Tribune | AUGUST 11, 2015 — 10:53AM

Smuggling is as American as apple pie. During the fiscal year 1872-1873, for example, the commissioner of customs estimated that 36,830 travelers smuggled nearly $130 million (about $2.4 billion today) in merchandise into the United States. And corporations found myriad ways to skirt tariffs, by bribing appraisers (who usually checked only one of every 10 crates) and undervaluing the goods they were importing.

In “Contraband,” Andrew Wender Cohen, an associate professor of history at Syracuse University, provides an informative and lively account of smuggling, stocked with a boatload of rascals, rogues and revenuers. He uses the preoccupation with smuggling as a portal to examine the dominant political issues of the 18th and 19th centuries: government power, privacy, taxes and tariffs, slavery and social class.

Cohen reminds us that America’s fight for independence began over a refusal to pay the import duties imposed by England on its colonies. In the antebellum era, northerners and Southerners debated the propriety of smuggling Africans into the United States (a violation of the 1808 ban on the international slave trade) and assisting slaves to escape from the South.

Throughout the 19th century, Cohen demonstrates that smuggling provided a test for proponents of two divergent economic philosophies. For free traders, smuggling was evidence that duties were prohibitively high, leading otherwise honest merchants to bypass the custom house; protectionists maintained that smugglers violated the law and threatened the livelihood of domestic workers.

Along the way, Cohen sheds light on other aspects of American society and culture. Many smugglers, including the indefatigable Charley Lazarus, he notes, were Jews. Their crimes provided fodder for anti-Semites. Cohen indicates as well that illegal trade in illicit goods (tobacco, alcohol and drugs) and luxury items (silk, lace and diamonds) boomed, despite efforts to discourage the consumption of products deemed threatening to good health and social equality.

In his search for the larger significances of smuggling, Cohen sometimes overreaches. His claim that “the modern right to privacy” emerged from a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1886 in a case involving the glass importing firm of Platt & Boyd that affirmed Fifth Amendment privileges against self-incrimination is a bit of a stretch. Nor does he make a compelling case that the emergence of the United States as a global power in the 20th century “broke the tariff’s hammerlock on national policy.” After all, promoters of protectionism — and protectionist policies — have by no means disappeared from 21st-century politics.

That said, Cohen has certainly succeeded in smuggling into his charming narrative fresh ways of thinking about the motivations behind and the implications of taxes and tax evasion for our economic and our political culture.

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CONTRABAND

By: Andrew Wender Cohen.

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COMING SUNDAY: A review of “Between the World and Me,” by Ta-Nehisi Coates.