Smuggling and contraband trade were ubiquitous features of early modern empires. That truism was perhaps nowhere more applicable than in Spain’s overseas kingdoms, where the metropole proved unable to supply its expansive empire, and subjects in underserved American ports turned to illicit, interimperial trade. Spanish America’s illicit economies have long interested scholars, from quantitative studies to analyses of the role of smuggling in imperial competition and warfare. Despite the prevalence of scholarship on early modern contraband trade—and ample evidence of its existence in the archives—few works on the social history of illicit economies exist. What did it mean for a colonial society to depend on black market exchanges with foreign merchants? What was the relationship between smuggling and racial ideologies, gender norms, or colonial hierarchies?

In his new book, *The Smugglers’ World: Illicit Trade and Atlantic Communities in Eighteenth-Century Venezuela*, historian Jesse Cromwell provides a well-written and thoroughly researched model for reconstructing “the social foundations of early modern illicit economies” (p. 24). Centered on eighteenth-century Venezuela, Cromwell presents three interrelated arguments. First, he argues that Venezuelan residents constructed local moral economies that proved flexible enough to embrace participation in contraband trade and a declared loyalty to the Spanish crown. Building on E. P. Thompson’s work on moral economies in an English context, Cromwell pushes the concept further to include illicit economies. Second, Cromwell shows how the quotidian nature of contraband trade in Venezuela led subjects and officials to develop “an alternate conception of commercial law,” where both parties consented to a certain amount of criminal behavior (p. 16). As he demonstrates, only the most flagrant violators of Spanish commercial law or the most vulnerable members of Venezuela’s society received punishment for engaging in the kinds of illicit economic activities that undergirded Venezuela’s local economy. And third, Cromwell contends that “conflict over illicit trade in the Spanish Atlantic is, in fact, a story of empire building” (p. 17). As local actors and imperial officials negotiated the contours of acceptable levels of criminality, Cromwell argues, they also shaped the very nature of the relationship between colony and metropole.

References to contraband trade between empires pervade local and imperial archives. But, as Cromwell points out, these records are notoriously difficult to work with; after all, it was in the best interests of participants to keep their involve-
ment secret. While a problematic archive has prevented historians from uncovering with certainty the volume of illicit trade in a given society, Cromwell reads that same archive against the grain for what it reveals about the individuals involved in Venezuela’s contraband economy. According to Cromwell, “Colonial records that sought to document the prosecution unintentionally revealed the history of the prosecuted” (p. 27). For social history, prize court cases are a valuable, if underutilized, source that Cromwell deftly weaves into research from imperial archives in England and Spain. The result is a nuanced portrait of Venezuelan society during a critical moment in the eighteenth century, which exposes “at the granular level, the gap between how imperial planners envisioned colonial trade and how provincial subjects experienced and modified it” (p. 25).

The prologue of the book opens with a description of the ritual around chocolate consumption among eighteenth-century European elites. The opening underscores Cromwell’s overarching argument about the ubiquity of smuggling because, as he writes, “Grandees could sip chocolate because petty traders made hardscrabble transactions in the shadow economies of the inter-imperial Caribbean” (p. 6). Cacao connected Venezuela to networks of inter-imperial trade, but it eventually drew the attention of Spanish imperial reformers in the early eighteenth century. Chapter 1 describes the development of Venezuela’s illicit economy as a result of imperial neglect. Venezuelan residents turned outward to the greater Caribbean for sources of trade, exchanging their cacao for European trade goods, a process Cromwell describes as “interimperial foraging” (p. 30). The second chapter follows those black market goods into Venezuelan society. Cromwell argues that the ubiquity of smuggled goods meant that, “ordinary people rarely saw smuggling as a morally repugnant or particularly severe crime” (p. 61). Cromwell also analyzes the cultural value of smuggled goods that drove the smuggling economy for nonmonetary reasons, such as asserting whiteness in a multiracial society through the consumption of European foods or wearing clothing made from European fabrics.

Favorable balances of trade emerged as a central concern for Spanish imperial reformers in the early eighteenth century. Chapter 3 traces the development of the Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas as an imperial solution to the prevalence of illicit trade in Venezuela. The experiment with the company, which promised to connect Venezuela to licit trade within the Spanish Empire and invigorate the local economy, occurred in Venezuela precisely because “creole commercial and governmental power was less entrenched [there] than in Mexico and Peru” (p. 98). Despite the initial promise, the company paid lower prices to Venezuelan cacao growers and forced area residents to pay higher prices for European trade goods than they had through the black market at the same time that they successfully policed against smuggling.

The narrative of an imperial center imposing ill-advised economic policies on a colonial periphery should sound familiar to historians of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. But, The Smugglers’ World is not simply a narrative about tensions between imperial policy and colonial reality. In the second half of the book, Cromwell develops a portrait of the social world created by smugglers, many of whom did not fit into neat categories of center or periphery. Chapter 4 develops a composite sketch of foreign smugglers who connected Venezuela to interimperial markets. Multi-imperial, polyglot crews possessed insider knowledge and local contacts, but they also faced violence and criminal prosecution, contradicting the “narrative of seamless intercolonial exchange” (p. 147). At the same time, Venezuelan merchants and officials more often facilitated economic exchanges with foreign merchants. In chapter 5, Cromwell shows how social connections, kinship, and bureaucratic ties protected some merchants
from prosecution but left others vulnerable. Spanish officials, the subject of chapter 6, smoothed the functioning of Venezuela’s black market through their direct involvement or simply by permitting a degree of quotidian criminality in colonial society.

Among the most liminal participants in Venezuela’s illicit economy were Afro-Caribbean people. Cromwell traces the experiences of free and enslaved people in chapter 7, showing how some people of African descent were smugglers who carried cargo between empires while others were themselves trafficked into slavery in Venezuela’s ports. Even free Afro-Caribbean smugglers were vulnerable to being enslaved if caught, since “their rights within one empire often dissolved as they crossed into another” (p. 244). The book concludes with a chapter on the León Rebellion against the Caracas Company in 1749. Cromwell explores the rebellion, in which Venezuelan subjects sought to rid themselves of company rule, as “an extreme example of the daily struggles over commercial control, subjecthood, and communal identity that illicit trade intensified in eighteenth-century Venezuela” (p. 11).

Smuggling affected every element of Venezuelan society, from free and enslaved people of African descent to Venezuelan residents who reacted with violence to restrictions on their ability to smuggle.

*The Smugglers’ World* provides a significant and well-executed contribution to Caribbean scholarship by asking, not how much contraband was passed between empires, but what it meant for Caribbean society to depend on illicit exchanges. While the book’s tight focus on Venezuela proves to be one of its strengths—allowing Cromwell to range widely across different elements of society while remaining grounded in a specific geography—it also provides opportunities for scholars moving forward. Cromwell shows how thoroughly smuggling influenced Venezuelan society, and future scholarship will benefit from using *The Smugglers’ World* as a model for re-
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