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Lindsay Porter, *Popular Rumor in Revolutionary Paris, 1792-1794*. Series “War, Culture, and Society, 1750-1850.” Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017. xii + 267 pp. Notes, bibliography of primary sources, index. £79.99, \$109.99, €93.50 (cl.) ISBN 978-3-319-86047-3. £63.99, \$84.99, €74.96 (e-bk.) ISBN978-3-319-56967-3.

Review by Robert Darnton, Harvard University

Thoughts on the History of Rumor

Lindsay Porter could not have chosen a better time to publish *Popular Rumour in Revolutionary Paris*. All of us are obsessed with rumors in the form of fake news diffused through the digital media. She does not insist on the parallels between rumor mongering today and in the Year II, nor does she need to. One sentence at the end of the introduction alerts the reader to the obvious: close study of the spread of information and misinformation among ordinary people during the French Revolution provides perspective on what we are living through today.

Yet I would prefer to turn the proposition around: today’s concern with the media and its messages can sharpen our sensitivity to an important aspect of the past. By carefully culling through archives and synthesizing previous research, Porter provides a fresh interpretation of one of the most dramatic moments in early modern history, the Year II. To be sure, historians have long emphasized the importance of rumor during the *jours* that shifted the course of the Revolution at all its critical points. Lefebvre’s *Great Fear* set a high standard for this kind of study, and the most recent specialists—notably Timothy Tackett, Colin Jones, Haim Burstin, and the much-missed Bronislaw Baczkó—have shown how the misperception of events could be as important as events themselves. What sets Porter’s work apart is its focus on rumors as everyday occurrences that ran throughout the period 1792-1794 and shaped the mentality of the *sans-culottes*.

Unlike her predecessors, Porter begins by invoking modern social science as a way to understand the material she turned up in the archives. Theorizing about rumors goes back to the activities of the United States Office of War information during World War II. (My mother worked for the OWI, and I remember her saying that its mission was to provide accurate information to the public, despite the constraints of war-time censorship, while avoiding the distortion of the news that had occurred during the propaganda campaigns of World War I.) *The Psychology of Rumor* (1947) by Gordon Allport and Leo Postman drew on the experience of the OWI to develop a systematic interpretation of rumor. It deserves to be read along with the work of other social scientists—notably Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Robert Merton—who transformed the understanding of communication, the media, and public opinion during the post-war years.

Porter does not draw on the rest of this theoretical literature, but she makes good use of Allport and Postman. They argued that rumors, unlike other means of communication, tend to “level” an

account of an incident, to “sharpen” it by focusing on some details and eliminating others, and to satisfy the recipients’ need to make sense of a confusing situation, particularly during times of collective anxiety. Rumors elevate the status of the person who spreads them and the solidarity of the group that receives them. When information is scarce, they tend to fill the void by attributing threats and misfortune to negative “others” who exist outside the community. As such, they can become a powerful force. In providing spin on events, they inhere in the way events play out.

The intense pressures of the Year II produced a fertile atmosphere for the incubation of rumors. Porter does not dwell on the events between September 1792 and July 1794, apparently because she assumes her readers will be familiar with the circumstances—the desperate war, the food shortages, the uprising in the Vendée, the anti-Jacobin revolts in the largest provincial cities, and the conspiracies at the heart of political conflict in Paris, from the purge of the Girondins to that of the Dantonistes, Hébertistes, and Robespieristes. She organizes her book according to themes, not as a narrative of events. More emphasis on the succession of crises, one more desperate than the other, would strengthen the thematic exposition, although she is careful to place the rumors in context. The last three chapters do justice to the collective anxieties of communities such as the faubourgs studied by Haim Burstin and Raymonde Monnier. And the book as a whole makes a strong case for understanding rumors in general according to the theory of Allport and Postman.

Porter shows how rumors permeated everyday activities such as buying supplies in market places and exchanging talk in taverns. They reinforced the cohesion of the neighborhood by maligning outsiders and people engaged in marginal occupations such as wigmakers, pedlars, dealers in luxury goods, dandies, gamblers, merchants, landlords, and all stripes of strangers. They also filled an information void, which fed the anxieties of ordinary people. While the government eliminated most independent newspapers, the streets filled with disturbing “noises”—*bruits publics* and the omnipresent *on dit*. How to make sense of it all? The need to understand what was actually going on beneath the cacaphony of noise made rumor mongers stand out from the crowd while the crowd itself pulled together in hostility to scapegoats supposedly connected with conspiracies.

Although they could involve general targets such as invisible *malveillants* or the anonymous, abstract “them,” meaning enemies located somewhere in the power structure, rumors tended to fix on particular individuals. Porter turned up many such cases by trolling through the Archives de la Préfecture de police along with more familiar sources such as the reports of police spies in Pierre Caron’s *Paris pendant la Terreur* and the well-trodden F7 series in the Archives nationales. Taken together, they do not make up a rogues gallery but rather a collective picture of victims of denunciation. After the Law of Suspects (17 September 1793), denunciation became a patriotic duty. Assignats carried the slogan: “La loi punit de mort le contrefacteur. La nation récompense le dénonciateur.” And after the law of 22 Prairial Year II (10 June 1794), hearsay counted as evidence, and anyone identified as an “enemy of the people” could easily go to the guillotine. As Bazcko emphasized, people were denounced for what they were, not for what they did.

Yet denunciation could itself be denounced, because rumors about reputation could be rebutted as crimes of calumny. Porter discusses several cases that show a vigorous contest between the accused and the accusers, indicating that justice was not entirely arbitrary as it was understood and exercised among the *sans-culottes*. Yet it had a cost, she argues. A “denunciation mania” contributed to a tendency to erase all distinction between public and private life, ultimately threatening “the notion of individuality itself.” Exactly how this process played out and how it tore into the social fabric remains unclear, because Porter provides only occasional glimpses rather than a full picture of daily life in the sections. As an account of the Terror at work at the neighborhood level, however, it is compelling and appalling.

Some of the cases she studies seem to have involved little more than attacks on reputations. Following Allport and Postman as well as recent studies of urban myths, Porter emphasizes the distinction between rumor (shared information that is believed but not confirmed) and gossip (brief social exchanges about individuals). Yet the distinction breaks down in many of the examples she cites (pp. 216-228), which suggest personal *règlements de compte* rather than collective fears about imminent catastrophes. None of them can be pursued in detail comparable to the rich descriptions in Lefebvre’s *Great Fear* or the other model study that Porter cites, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics Before the French Revolution* by Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel.

This problem suggests an unanswerable question: if the documentation were rich enough, what could one hope for in a history of rumor during the French Revolution? Not merely more information about subjects that are already familiar, such as the obsession with counter-revolutionary conspiracies and famine plots. What we do not understand adequately is the element in history that so often eludes research: oral communication. People were constantly talking with one another in revolutionary Paris—at work, in breadlines, over drinks in taverns—and they heard a great deal in the streets—from pedlars, songsters, and clusters of the “*curieux*” in nerve centers such as the Place Maubert, the Tuilerie Gardens and the Palais-Royal. A history of this talk would show how information traveled. One would follow its paths, describe its changing content, identify the groups through which it passed, and study the ways that they made sense of it as it ebbed and flowed, crossing paths with other means of communication such as images, graffiti, songs, letters, and all varieties of the printed word.

Lindsay Porter could not be expected to come up with such a history. Through no fault of her own—the limits belong to the nature of the documents, not to any lack of skill on her part—the results of her research fall short of what one hoped to find in opening her book. Yet she has enriched the understanding of the Revolution by showing how the Terror touched lives at street level. Her work contributes to a rich vein of writing that in the time of Philippe Ariès, Michel Vovelle, and Richard Cobb was celebrated as a breakthrough in historical understanding, the “*histoire des mentalités*.”

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