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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 David Garrioch, Monash University

The study of rumor during the French Revolution is a wonderful subject, whose importance and possibilities were suggested many years ago by Georges Lefebvre’s remarkable examination of the Great Fear. [1] The avenues opened up by Lefebvre have not been followed systematically across the revolutionary period, although many studies have referred to its role in the September Massacres and in other events of the 1790s. We do have brilliant studies of rumor and its effects in Old Regime Paris. Steven Kaplan’s “The Famine Plot Persuasion” looks at the recurrent conviction that grain was being hoarded, and at the way the rumor shifted over time to implicate the royal family. Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel examined the stories, in 1750, of children being kidnapped and sometimes murdered, and at the riots that resulted, situating the rumors in the context of people’s anxieties and beliefs amid changes in the nature of policing. In another vein, Robert Darnton has stressed the importance of stories about royal profligacy and immorality. [2] Lindsay Porter is well aware of this work, and one of the virtues of her book is to recognize the ways that revolutionary rumor renewed and built on older themes.

The subject of course takes on added interest and significance, as the introduction and conclusion point out, in the context of today’s concerns about “fake news”, and particularly about its influence on public debate and the outcomes of elections and referenda. The fact that the French Revolution brought not only massive political and social change, but unleashed an unprecedented flood of print material upon an audience unfamiliar with the accompanying techniques of political manipulation, is undoubtedly one of the reasons why, as Porter notes, rumor was able to flourish. The recent digital and online revolution of our own times has in certain ways had similar effects: “rumors flourish in times of anxiety,” writes Porter; “they thrive on ambiguity and uncertainty, filling the void left by lack of information” (p.1).

The book aims, overall, “to examine how political discourse influenced colloquial language and thus provided a framework for the ordinary citizen to interpret his or her immediate surroundings” (p.18); how it “impacted the consumption and appropriation of information; affected political action; and was used as evidence by the Revolutionary tribunal” (p.22). It does do some of these things. The second chapter is devoted to “Policing Popular Rumor.” Starting with concerns expressed in the Convention about the impact of false stories on public opinion, it shows how strongly aware the revolutionary government was, already in 1792, of the dangers of rumor—which it saw primarily as evidence of counter-revolutionary conspiracies—and that it attempted to monitor the circulation of information. The chapter introduces the key source on which the book is based, the reports of “observers” (in other words, spies) employed by the

government and its different committees. It contains quite a good analysis of the defects of these reports, making many of the same points as Richard Cobb, who also used them extensively in *The Police and the People*. [3]

The third chapter, on communication networks, first examines the role of hawkers, again primarily from the perspective of the authorities, who like the Old Regime authorities attempted to police both what they sold and the way they sold it: quite a few newspaper and pamphlet vendors were arrested for embellishing and even inventing the content of the publications they were hawking through the streets. The second part of this chapter looks at the role of personal correspondence in spreading rumors, and offers some intelligent analysis of the way educated observers like Rosalie Jullien distinguished between false and accurate news, although even she sometimes conveyed unfounded rumor.

This is followed by a chapter aiming to understand the precise mechanisms by which rumor influenced crowd action, and hence to move beyond the general understanding that there was a connection. I was not convinced that it achieved this goal, which seemed to me to require close analysis of the way particular stories motivated particular groups to behave in particular ways. A good model would have been Timothy Tackett's study of the role of rumor in the September Massacres. [4] Porter, like other historians, identifies food as a key issue for the population of revolutionary Paris, much of which believed that shortages were not real and that the new political elites, like the old ones, were appropriating goods for themselves. The final section of the chapter returns to the issue of policing, reiterating the point that the authorities assumed counter-revolutionaries to be behind these rumors.

The following two chapters turn to the nature of the urban communities that were affected by rumor, although much of the first is again concerned with the way rumor was policed, with spies particularly targeting cafes, gambling houses, and looking out for people whose appearance made them suspect – although this could mean almost anything, since even patriotic emblems could be borne by counter-revolutionaries aiming to deceive the simple-minded. There is a long section on the importance of personal reputation, largely based on the secondary literature, followed by an interesting discussion of calumny and of ways of dealing with it in the revolutionary context. A growing quantity of paperwork was required in order to document one's patriotic credentials.

The final chapter looks at denunciation, which by the Year II had become a civic responsibility. There is some good analysis of the grounds upon which denunciations were made, and of the ways people defended themselves, concluding that such defences were “still no match for whispered insinuations and slander” (p. 231). Nevertheless, what struck me in the numerous examples of the ways various authorities dealt with denunciations was, as Alex Fairfax-Cholmeley has argued in the case of the Revolutionary Tribunal itself, their awareness that personal grievances often underpinned them and their ability to take such factors into account. [5] That said, the unfortunate victim might end up passing some time in an unsavoury revolutionary prison.

It will be clear from this summary that readers of this book should not expect a study of rumor along the lines of the ones on the Old Regime that I mentioned above. There are many

fascinating examples that indicate what rumors were circulating in revolutionary Paris, but this work does not offer a typology, nor an analysis of the ways in which the content, nature, or communication of rumors may have shifted across the revolutionary period. Personally, I would have been interested in these aspects of the question, particularly in the light of the author's assurance, on the opening page, that "an examination of the role of rumor during the French Revolution ... reveals the collective concerns of the communities that lived through it ... [and] raises questions about what stories were believed and why" (p. 1). Closer attention to shifts over time would also have helped to elucidate the relationship between official discourse and rumor, which is one of the questions posed by the book; as well as to trace shifts such as that in the image of politicians: the deputies of the National Assembly were seen as heroes in 1789, but by 1793 some rumors represented them as no better than the aristocrats of the Old Regime. However, I am conscious that reviewers should not focus on the book they expected to read, but on the one before them. The main contribution of this work is to our understanding of official perceptions and of the policing of rumor, and not only in 1792-4 as the title suggests, since there are valuable references to attempts to deal with the problem in 1790 and 1791, as well as a few hints of what followed (at least with respect to denunciations) during the post-Thermidorean period.

I would have liked a more rigorous, and more systematically applied, definition of "rumor", and particularly of "popular rumor." The term and its associations are discussed in the introduction, and it is succinctly defined as "a shared piece of information that has not yet been confirmed, but is believed at the point of transmission to be true" (p.3). This definition has both limitations and important qualities. It may or may not accurately describe re-tweets of Donald Trump's numerous communications. It certainly does not indicate how far the piece of information has to circulate before it becomes a "rumor", or whether there need to be many participants or only a handful. That said, the definition also contains elements that are important to retain. A rumor is not necessarily false. Nor is it exclusively verbal. Porter takes issue with Robert Knapp's 1944 definition of rumor, adopted by many later writers, as a purely oral phenomenon, and this is an important observation in the context of the French Revolution. Revolutionary rumors were sometimes started by individuals, as in the case of the one that claimed Robespierre intended to marry Louis XVI's daughter and set himself up as king. They were transmitted through print and through correspondence, as well as in face-to-face conversation, and Porter points to the complex interconnections between different media. That too is a valuable corrective to common understandings. Further discussion does begin to construct a typology: "conscious" rumors are those identified as such in the sources—as unverified information—and "unconscious" ones are believed by the person recounting them (p. 85). A later discussion (pp. 138-9) identifies "three separate but inter-related types of rumor": those that revived older beliefs in famine plots or aristocratic "malfeasance"; those that reflect anxieties of the moment, blaming butchers or *émigrés* for current ills; and those which targeted people within the community, such as merchants or women. This, to my mind, confuses content with medium, and assimilates rumor and conspiracy theories, though the latter were certainly a common content of rumors during the revolutionary years. At other points, rumor is conflated with condemnations in official reports. Hence, coach drivers are said to be "targeted for particular rumors relating to the most recent *levée*" (p.159): this refers to reports by police observers that coachmen were deserting at the moment of departure for the front (p. 169, note 91). People who were arrested for abusing the deputies of the Convention or for "*propos incendiaires*" in a café were not necessarily spreading

rumors, although the official concern was clearly that they might start one. The extensive discussions of insults, of calumny, and of denunciation, while interesting and sound in themselves, did not always seem to me to have much to do with rumor. These were forms of behavior that had a very different social function, and nor were they necessarily shared (in the sense of reflecting collective beliefs). They thus do not seem to fit the proposed definition of “rumor”.

The issue of what represented “popular rumor” is equally complex. The author does not, as far as I can see, define the term “popular”, despite its presence in the book’s title. The introduction contains a lengthy discussion of the meaning of “sans-culotte”, but that is not the same thing. “Popular” is in some places clearly used to mean “plebeian” (“the popular classes,” p. 16), elsewhere to refer to “the people” more generally (“popular will,” p. 16; perhaps “voice of popular opinion,” p. 213). To which category does “popular, often violent, behaviour” (p. 16) belong, or “popular perceptions of Jacobins as *buveurs de sang* and *cannibales*” (p. 244)? This may seem nit-picking, but it points to a question I found myself asking repeatedly in reading this book, from the title page to the conclusion: who are the actors in the case of revolutionary rumor, and who is the audience? Since one of the aims of the book was to see how “colloquial language” was influenced by official discourse, then it matters who the speaker was. The many examples of what was being said (“*on dit*”) that are drawn from reports by police spies are often highly ambiguous in this respect. The sources themselves make clear that in many cases they refer to overheard conversations, rather than to something that was necessarily circulating widely in the streets of Paris. A police spy also had a vested interest in uncovering something, anything, in order to get paid for his reports (most were male) and to continue to be employed in future. This does not invalidate a study that in practice focuses primarily on official attitudes and on policing, but it is a problem if one wants to get to the heart of revolutionary rumor, its content, circulation, and impact.

## NOTES

[1] Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973).

[2] Steven Kaplan, “The Famine Plot Persuasion in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 72 (1982): 1-79. Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991). See also Farge, *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 1995); Robert Darnton, “An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *The American Historical Review*, 105 (2000): 1-35; and Robert Darnton, *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2010).

[3] Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest 1789-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

[4] Timothy Tackett, “Rumor and Revolution: The Case of the September Massacres,” *French History and Civilization*, 4 (2011): 54-64, at <https://h-france.net/rude/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/TackettVol4.pdf>.

[5] Alex Fairfax-Cholmeley, “Defence, Collaboration, Counter-Attack: The Role and Exploitation of the Printed Word by Victims of the Terror, 1793-1794,” in David Andress, ed., *Experiencing the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 137-54.

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