

H-France Forum
Volume 14, Issue 2, #4

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 Marisa Linton, Kingston University

Rumour was a powerful driving force behind French revolutionary politics. Porter's engaging and thought-provoking study of popular rumour gives us a great deal to reflect about and for that we should thank her. She has set herself a challenging task. By its very nature this is a nebulous subject, presenting multiple problems relating to the source material (much of it originally oral) and its often problematic interpretation. These inherent difficulties may have contributed to the fact that up until now few historians had ventured to study rumour as a subject in its own right, though some studies of specific rumours have thrown light on popular attitudes. [1] Porter's absorbing study explores rumours in Paris, at the height of the Revolution, between 1792 and 1794. In doing so she musters convincing evidence to demonstrate how profoundly rumours affected the dynamics of revolutionary politics.

Porter is fully alive to both the difficulties and the potential of her subject. Her book is one of a growing body of studies that contribute to our greater understanding of the impact of emotions in French revolutionary politics. Recent historians have paid particular attention to the emotions experienced by revolutionary leaders and how these emotions influenced their political choices. [2] Porter focuses her attentions, however, not on the political elite, but on the urban poor. We get to hear about the emotions of a populace that was often volatile and uneasy, in large part because so many of the urban poor were living an already precarious existence, their lives subject to the availability of food and work, and to the vagaries of whoever had power over their lives. Before the Revolution it was the agents of the monarchy that such people feared and suspected. During the Revolution, ironically, it was often the revolutionaries themselves who were seen as enemies of the people. Much of this book takes place on the streets of Paris, where we catch vivid glimpses of a wide variety of people, from market women to police spies, who appear momentarily, often forcefully, in the sources, then vanish from our sight. Porter's approach recalls the world of pre-revolutionary rumour, as illuminated through fears of child abduction and murder by a supposedly decadent, occasionally vampiric, court nobility; beliefs that clearly influenced rumours on the streets of revolutionary Paris about the parasitic court nobility. [3]

The source material with which Porter has to deal is often problematic and gives rise to many questions of methodological interpretation. Most of it was originally oral, then transformed into a written version which has been preserved (though so many of the police reports were lost in the conflagration of 1871). The phrase "*on dit*", both powerful and ambivalent, was one employed in

many written reports, as well as letters commenting on the latest news. Porter explores the ways that people who wrote about rumour often added to it. Government spies and police agents contributed to rumour as well as policing it, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes intentionally, often for strategic reasons. Colporteurs also did more than sell news; they also helped to influence its reception. Rumour-spreading was not just confined to people who operated mainly in an oral culture: educated people could, and often did, contribute to rumour mills. One of these was Rosalie Jullien. The letters of Madame Jullien offer a valuable source into the mind of an educated woman close to the heart of the Jacobin leadership in the Year II. As a woman, Jullien was both close to politics (enjoying trusted friendships with Robespierre and several others), and at one remove from it, as she was blocked from active politics herself, and could only observe and advise her son and husband. Porter uses the 1881 edition of Jullien's letters, though a fuller edition is now available through the work of Annie Duprat. [4] As Porter says, personal letters could be conduits for rumour. She offers Rosalie Jullien as an example of a bourgeois woman who was aware of the potential unreliability of rumours that circulated on the street—Jullien spoke of them revealingly as "*fausse nouvelles*" (fake news)—yet by repeating the rumours in her letters, she herself inadvertently contributed both to spreading them and to giving them greater credibility.

Food and food shortages were central preoccupations both for the revolutionary crowds, and for the people responsible for supplying their needs. Rumours of the "famine plot", surfaced in many eighteenth-century food riots. [5] Rumours of "famine plots" continued to circulate in the Revolution. Before the Revolution, it was the privileged elite of the *ancien régime*, above all the court nobility and those responsible for the distribution of grain and other essential supplies, who were seen as the instigators and beneficiaries of plots to starve the people. During the Revolution, prominent revolutionaries replaced "aristos" in the popular mentality as the group most likely to be monopolising luxury foodstuffs at the expense of the people. Rumours of high food consumption were the basis of some of the most dangerous allegations that could be made against revolutionary elites. Porter states that in the Year II, at a time when "cereal of some kind – whether as bread or in liquid, such as gruel or broth—made up at least 95% of the diet of the poor" for a person or persons to be the subject of rumours that they were eating excessively could be dangerous, "the act of eating itself—became a means of identifying the immorality of others" (p. 111). The dining habits of the conventionnels were particularly vulnerable to suspicion and public scrutiny. Rumours abounded that certain deputies, often the most prominent, were meeting in their homes or the more luxurious restaurants to eat and drink well, at the expense of the people. The risks for the deputies concerned augmented still further if the rumours included allegations that they were using private dinners to consort with known or suspected counter-revolutionaries. [6]

The final chapter deals with the fraught relationship between "rumour, denunciation and terror". From July 1793 onwards, "*on dit*" featured increasingly in official police reports, becoming a justification for an investigation into the integrity of the person who was the subject of a denunciation (p. 213). Ironically, being a professional politician was one of the most dangerous professions in the Year II. During this time the deputies of the Convention had no effective immunity from arrest and, if indicted, they could be tried for treason. A high proportion of the conventionnels perished by state violence under the guillotine as "traitors" to the Revolution, most during the Year II, though some after it. There is a growing body of historical work on the

very real risks incurred by the conventionnels and how the increasingly toxic atmosphere in which they laboured influenced their political choices. [7] Porter's invaluable contribution to this historiography is to show how rumours on the streets of Paris fuelled allegations against revolutionary leaders, thus contributing to the political instability. As she rightly reminds us, however, rumour was neither neutral, nor the unmediated production of the poor, uneducated and economically desperate. Rumours worked in complex ways, and were subject to strategic manipulation by many interested parties.

The *conventionnels* became some of the principal targets of rumours that they were themselves the "enemy within", ambitious self-serving politicians, whose supposed commitment to the "*bien public*" was a disguise that cloaked corruption, financial, or even political. The *conventionnels* needed to retain their reputations for authentic political virtue which, once lost, could lead rapidly to personal disaster. There was a deliberate "culture of calumny" used against all categories of political activists. [8] Some revolutionary leaders were not above deliberately circulating rumours in order to destroy political enemies. A notorious example of this is the rumour that Robespierre had planned to make himself king by marrying the young daughter of Louis XVI. This story was fabricated by Robespierre's enemies on the Committee of General Security, during the hours following his arrest and execution. It was given apparent credibility by the planting of a seal bearing the *fleur-de-lys* in the offices of the Commune where Robespierre and his supporters had just been arrested (p. 7). As Vadier of the Committee of General Security, one of the instigators of this narrative, admitted many years later: "The danger of losing one's head made one imaginative." [9]

Porter's analysis is never less than insightful, and often it is compelling. Through the medium of rumours she shows us revolutionary politics from a new angle, not from the heights of the Convention but from the perspective of the street. Yet one or two phrases that she uses, the terms "Jacobin discourse" and "Girondin moderates" (e.g. pp. 18-21, 45), should be employed with caution. Historians (and I count myself as an offender) frequently use this kind of phrase as a shorthand, partly in an attempt to avoid over-long and clunky modifying clauses in every other sentence. Yet the risk of giving the label "Jacobin discourse" to conspiracy rumours is that it suggests that there was something essentially or exclusively *Jacobin* about fears of conspiracy. Certainly the Jacobins were prone to believe in conspiracies during the crisis years of 1792 to 1794. But belief in the existence of conspiracies was prevalent throughout the Revolution. It could be found at every stage and amongst every group. To take just one example, it was Brissot and his group (still at that time "Jacobins", later "Girondins", but never I would argue "moderates") who were primary movers in a strategy to use rumours of an "Austrian Committee" that met secretly in the Bois de Boulogne to plan the overthrow of the Revolution. The rumour was deployed to fuel the arguments for a war to flush out the "enemy within" over the winter and spring of 1791 to 1792. As Tom Kaiser has shown, belief in a conspiracy of Austrian interests at court had its origins in a time long before the Revolution, and well before the terms Jacobins or Girondins came into being. [10] Fear of conspiracy was not unique to the Jacobins, nor was it characteristic of a particularly Jacobin ideology or paranoia. Revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries believed in conspiracies. [11] Indeed, given the right circumstances all kinds of people can believe in conspiracies. Such beliefs were as prevalent in the early modern world, as they are in contemporary society. [12] In November 2018, for example, the "Conspiracy and Democracy" research project based at CRASSH, University of Cambridge, published its

alarming finding that 60% of people in contemporary Britain believe in conspiracy theories about politics. [13] Political conspiracy beliefs ebb and flow, but they are particularly powerful when joined with fear and political instability, and in a context where people are struggling to explain or understand forces at work in politics that have power over their lives.

These circumstances were undoubtedly at work in the Year II. Instability and political uncertainty raised the stakes as regards rumours and made people more likely to give them credence. It is no coincidence, as Porter shows, that 1792-1794, a period when the revolutionary rumour mills were at their height, coincided with the critical circumstances when external war and (from March 1793 onwards) civil war, contributed to escalating panic and the recourse to terror. It was a time when many people, particularly amongst the more educated and including many Jacobins, were more inclined to take seriously rumours that, in calmer times, had met much greater scepticism. When people are most afraid and least able to control or even comprehend their circumstances then rumours and conspiracy theories may seem most persuasive. In this respect the people of the late eighteenth century had more than a little in common with us in our own time, and our own obsession with “fake news.” As Porter aptly puts this: “Rumours flourish in times of anxiety” (p. 1). And unfortunately for us, like the French revolutionaries, we live in increasingly anxious times.

NOTES

[1] Above all, the path-breaking work, originally published in 1932, by Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, trans. Joan White (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973).

[2] Recent works that explore the often complex connections between revolutionaries’ ideologies and their emotions include: Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[3] See Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics Before the French Revolution*, trans. Claudia Miéville (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

[4] Rosalie Jullien, *Les Affaires d’état sont mes affaires de Coeur. Lettres de Rosalie Jullien, une femme dans la Révolution (1775-1810)*, ed. Annie Duprat (Paris: Belin, 2016).

[5] On the “famine plot,” see the works of Steven Kaplan, including, Steven L. Kaplan, *Le complot de famine. Histoire d’une rumeur au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions de l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1995).

[6] On fine dining and conspicuous consumption as an allegation suffered by many conventionnels, see Marisa Linton and Mette Harder, “‘Come and Dine’: The Dangers of Conspicuous Consumption in French Revolutionary Politics,” *European History Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2015): 615-37.

[7] On this subject, in addition to Linton, *Choosing Terror* and Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror*, see Michel Biard, *La Liberté ou la mort. Mourir en député 1792-1795* (Paris: Tallandier, 2015); and Mette Harder, “Crisis of Representation: The National Convention and the Search for Political Legitimacy, 1792-1795,” (PhD diss., University of York, 2010). For the extent to which purges of deputies continued after Thermidor see Mette Harder, “A Second Terror: The Purges of French Revolutionary Legislators after Thermidor,” *French Historical Studies* 38, no. 1 (2015): 33-60.

[8] Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[9] See Bronislaw Baczko, *Ending the Terror: The French Revolution After Robespierre*, trans. Michael Petheram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Vadier’s admission is cited on p. 16.

[10] Amongst Kaiser’s works to illuminate the culture of Austrophobia, see Thomas E. Kaiser, “From the Austrian Committee to the Foreign Plot: Marie-Antoinette, Austrophobia and the Terror,” *French Historical Studies* 26, no. 4 (2003): 579-617.

[11] On fears of conspiracy amongst all sections of society during the Revolution, see Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser, and Marisa Linton, eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

[12] On conspiracy beliefs in early modern Europe, see Barry Coward and Julian Swann, eds., *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe: From the Waldensians to the French Revolution* (Hampshire and Burlington: Routledge, 2004).

[13] “Conspiracy and Democracy” research project, Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), University of Cambridge (November 2018): URL <http://www.conspiracyanddemocracy.org/>.

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H-France Forum Volume 14 (2019), Issue 2, #4