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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.

Response by Lindsay Porter

When I was researching and writing this book, Russian disinformation campaigns were in their infancy, the term “fake news” had not yet been coined, and Donald Trump was widely regarded as merely a reality show has-been whose opportunistic endorsement of Birther conspiracy rumours about President Obama seemed to mark him out as beyond the pale of respectable political conversation. It was only in the final stages of completing the book that the political significance of rumour in times of political instability and rapid changes in the social technologies of communication came to take on a renewed relevance. As Robert Darnton points out in his review, the mirror of significance needs to reflect both ways. I am therefore grateful for the opportunity that this H-France Forum, with its four generous and insightful reviews, has given me to return to thinking about the role of rumour in Revolutionary Paris, in the light of recent events.

Scholars have argued, for example, that conspiracy talk has been increasingly delegitimised in the political mainstream since the 1960s, but the Trump presidency has overturned this view: conspiracy theories are no longer confined to the political margins, because in the White House we now have the Conspiracy Theorist in Chief. Yet Trump marks an important shift in conspiracy-mongering in other ways. As political scientists Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum argue in a new book, Trump specialises in what they call “conspiracy without theory.” [1]. Unlike traditional conspiracy theories that—for better or for worse—try to make sense of contemporary events by developing a narrative account of hidden causes, Trump’s 4 a.m. tweets often merely insinuate connections and hint at denunciations, forgoing evidence and explanation. His tweets often use the formulation “a lot of people are saying” or “I’m hearing that,” an uncanny echo of the “on dit” that I came across so frequently in my research on the French Revolution and its aftermath. Despite the usual disclaimer that retweeting ≠ endorsement, the mere act of retweeting rumours can have serious consequences.

David Garrioch rightly identifies that one of the key questions to ask is, “who are the actors in the case of revolutionary rumor, and who is the audience?” Although I would have liked to offer a more detailed and precise account of the actors and audiences of revolutionary rumour, one of the political effects of the circulation of rumour in the period—as Trump’s populist tweets all too often make clear—is precisely to insist on the distinction between Them and Us, the elites and the people, only then endlessly to blur that distinction. Although, as Garrioch notes, my use of the term “popular” could have benefitted from greater precision, the dangerous appeal of the political

rhetoric of populism is precisely to make it increasingly difficult to work out who “the people” really are.

Furthermore, the really dangerous consequence of Trump’s conspiracy-mongering is not the particular content of this or that tweet, the veracity of which can be easily fact-checked. It is instead, as many commentators have noted, the delegitimation of reason, argument, and truth in public discourse. The effect of the endless churn of rumour, suspicion, and conspiracy in the age of post-truth politics is less the attack on particular individuals or narratives, than the undermining of democracy. And this helps clarify one of the aims of my book. Although Darnton and Garrioch understandably would have liked a change-over-time narrative account of the escalating role of particular rumours in the period and a “close analysis of the way particular stories motivated particular groups to behave in particular ways,” I was conscious that this approach—tracing a particular story and its political effects—had already been conducted with consummate expertise (by, among others, Lefebvre, Baczko, Kaplan, Tackett, and Andress). I agree that focusing more on developments over time would indeed have revealed important aspects of the role of rumour in the larger sweep of the revolutionary period (most notably, the relationship between official discourse and street-level rumour), but it was already a logistical challenge to find and make sense of the varieties of rumour in the narrowly constrained historical moment of 1792-94.

I was also concerned to balance a reading of particular rumours as a response to peculiar times with an account of the uncanny persistence of certain tropes, many of which predate the revolution: rumours do change over time, but they are often also depressingly familiar. Likewise my starting point was that rumours are not merely occasional, pathological irruptions of mass hysteria, but they can easily become part of the normal operation of political life (and here I am grateful to Marisa Linton for identifying my work as a contribution to the history of emotions). The parallel with conspiracy-mongering is instructive, because we are often confronted with the question of whether conspiracy theorists such as Trump genuinely mean what they say—are in some sense or other “paranoid”—or whether they are cynically circulating the stories to whip up public fear (as Michel Biard suspects). However, rather than fruitlessly trying to diagnose the individual conspiracy theorist or rumour-monger, we can consider the cultural work that these shared stories perform within particular communities and at specific historical moments. Rumours, like memes, can often escape the control of those who create or instrumentally exploit them. (And here I am grateful to Biard for pointing out some errors in my text, particularly in the transcription of a manuscript document. The irony, of course, is that a small, innocent mistake is often what allows a rumour to go viral as it passes along a chain of Chinese whispers.)

Instead of following the transmission of a particular rumour, I was attempting to consider how rumour more generally contributed to everyday social and political life, shaping communal identity as much as the fear of denunciation fragmented social trust. The parallel would be that, instead of tracking the epidemiology of a rumour such as the Birther narrative, my goal was to analyse what happens to a society (through the lens of the citizen in particular *faubourgs* in Year II) when rumor-mongering and denunciation become normalised. It is for this reason that I marshalled my evidence into thematic rather than chronological chapters, in an effort to put rumour centre stage as a mode of communication over and above the unfolding of particular rumours. As with the case of Trump, we can rightly unpack not only the consequences of

individual accusations and episodes of misinformation, but also the effect on popular sentiment of “conspiracy without theory” and the delegitimation of truth itself.

Biard identifies my approach as unnecessarily “*impressioniste*”, and this raises interesting questions about methodology and sources that the other reviewers also note. There is not space here to engage fully in the wider debates about the validity of the working methods of cultural history, and its penchant for close reading of the anecdote, against the grain, in order to get at the political unconscious of everyday ways of seeing and feeling. This way of working can always succumb to the dangers of cherry-picking, but my method in working through the archives—incomplete as they are—was to shuttle continuously between letting analytical categories emerge spontaneously from my sampling of the documents, and then testing those frameworks back against the evidence. As other scholars have found, if you go looking for conspiracy talk, like the true paranoid, you start to find it everywhere. Yet, as all the reviewers note, there are particular challenges in trying to make sense of everyday rumour in this period. It is an especially nebulous topic, one that (as all recognise) is clearly vital to the period, yet hard to focus on directly. For one thing, what we find in the archive are usually written traces of oral rumours, rather than rumours themselves, and they are often further complicated by the fact that the written accounts themselves may well be exaggerated versions of the overheard original—perhaps even entirely fabricated by those spying for the authorities, for a variety of reasons. In the present, folklorists trained in the methodologies of anthropology, for example, can listen in first-hand to conspiracy talk, and scholars are now also using data big analytics to trace the emergence and transmission of particular fake news memes in the dense social networks of the online global village. But, as the reviewers note, popular rumour in revolutionary Paris is elusive, not helped by the fact that rumours in the period often converge with conspiracy talk on the one hand, and denunciation on the other. I therefore warmly welcome Darnton’s suggestion that a future, fuller study of everyday rumour in the French revolution would also need to examine how “it ebbed and flowed, crossing paths with other means of communication such as images, graffiti, songs, letters, and all varieties of the printed word.” It might take an army of archival detectives to perform that task.

NOTES

[1] Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

Lindsay Porter
lindsayporter@ntlworld.com

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