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Jay Caplan, *Postal Culture in Europe, 1500-1800*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2016. xiv + 210 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. £60.00, €71.00, \$75.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7294-1175-2.

Review by Michèle Longino, Duke University

We can trace the major developmental thrust of the postal system such as we know it to the early modern period, and see it as closely associated with the rise of mercantilism, the improvement of roads, and the beginnings of the inexorable movement that today we term “globalization.” It is logical that we investigate the history of the “practice of communication at a distance” given our interest in material culture and our desire better to understand the past from which we come. But, at the same time, we also salute a system that has served us well, just as this form of communication, “snail mail,” is rapidly giving way to virtual electronic and instantaneous communication and may soon disappear entirely under the pressure of the screen and behind the dominance of the image. Jay Caplan’s book both investigates and renders homage to the world and times of communication by letter. *Postal Culture* is a fascinating, highly readable, well-documented study, with a surprising reach, and a brisk pace that makes learning from it a real pleasure.

The book consists of six chapters. An introduction offers an overview of the arc and range of the work. This mapping out of what is to come is most helpful, especially since it presents and justifies some surprising post-modern twists to the story’s conclusion that include Kafka, Derrida, and Pynchon. The first chapter is a history of various postal services throughout Europe in the early modern period, especially the Habsburg Empire, the United Kingdom, and France. From family businesses (the Taxis and the Thurn) in the Empire, to government instituted monopolies in England, to a combination of privately owned businesses and a state-controlled system in France, the rulers in these countries or kingdoms came quickly to the same conclusion: there was no better way to ensure complete surveillance of the population than to control all communication by mail. Consequently, governments quickly took over and developed postal systems. In the process, they realized that they could also derive profit from the mails through the levying of postal tariffs for services of delivery rendered while serving as the primary agents responsible for ensuring that the infrastructure (roads and bridges) was adequate and well paved to facilitate passage of the post coaches. Governments also negotiated agreements among themselves whereby the mails could circulate internationally without interruption.

The second chapter focuses on the actual make-up of letters in early modern times. There were no envelopes such as we know them today, only ingenious ways of folding, binding, and sealing paper to guarantee privacy. Nor did mailing addresses yet exist, and letters were frequently addressed to the post office or landmark closest to the addressee’s home. House numbers were invented at a later date to help in the determination of tax rates for inhabitants of a residence, as well as for purposes of requiring military conscription. In addition, postage was paid not by the addresser but by the addressee, which caused all kinds of tension and problems and annoyance when the letter or packet delivered was not a welcome one. These are just a few of the sorts of gems of knowledge to be gleaned from a reading of Caplan’s study.

The third chapter studies the kinds of surveillance developed by states to control their subjects. These took the shape primarily of *cabinets noirs*, which would later become the source of particular complaints from the French people at the time of the Revolution. Communication, aided and abetted by the state through the mails, encouraged free speech and, at the same time, necessitated control of that free speech in the form of surveillance. Systems for encrypting, coding, and decoding were developed in response to these state efforts in order to protect the privacy and secrecy of correspondence. Knowledge that their letters were being intercepted and read by third parties sometimes caused letter writers to include in their texts a few comments specifically intended for these unwelcome readers, or even disinformation designed to mislead them. We learn in particular about the surveillance to which some individuals were subjected, for example, the Palatine Princess, whose loyalty to France was perpetually in doubt because of her Habsburg birth. The system of spying on suspect letter writers could also be perverted from inside by petty officials of the postal service assigned the job of surveillance. They occasionally even blackmailed the very individuals whose mail they were intercepting. The king would eventually institute his own private and secret message service rather than entrust his own mail to the post. Indeed, many individuals would ask their friends to deliver letters personally or to distribute entire packets of messages for various addressees rather than have confidence in the state-controlled systems.

Chapter four studies the example of Voltaire who lived most of his adult life in exile, frequently expressed controversial opinions, and enjoyed an insatiable appetite for news from France, England, Russia, Denmark, and all courts of interest at the time. He received such a large volume of letters, some from total strangers and totally unwelcome, that he drew up a list for his local post office of all the individuals from whom he welcomed mail, asking them simply to return to sender any mail from people not on that list. The post office would discard any of Voltaire's mail thought to be seditious. This could include entire packages since printed matter came to be considered the most dangerous of imports into France towards the end of the ancien régime. While Voltaire was mostly annoyed by the practices of censorship, he sometimes welcomed the opportunity to foil and outfox his adversaries in the post.

Chapter five takes on another figure of the Enlightenment, one often paired with the worldly Voltaire for purposes of contrast, whose psychological make-up provoked a quite different reaction to and experience of the postal service. Rousseau enjoyed less material control over his own personal circumstances since he was frequently the guest of others, not always due to deep friendship, but due rather to simple need. Tortured by his own persecution complex, Rousseau considered everything about the mail to be calculated against him, beginning with the simple fact that absence was generally the fundamental reason for correspondence when what he most preferred and valued was transparent presence. Since he was poor, he could not afford to pay incoming postage for just anyone who wanted to contact him. He went so far as to publish a notice in the *Mercure de France*, notifying any and all possible correspondents that their letters were unwelcome and would go unread and asking them please to cease and desist. He would remove himself to regions of Switzerland where there were no postal services to protect himself from such attentions. Caplan moves into literary analysis in this chapter elaborating Rousseau's own attitudes towards the mails as exemplified by his characters Julie and Saint Preux in the epistolary novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. When he could, Rousseau preferred to engage a private messenger or the services of a friend to deliver letters, so distrustful was he of the mails. Nevertheless, he remained exceedingly dependent on the mails, as did his characters Saint Preux and Julie, since he was constantly on the move, fleeing from supposed enemies or crowds in search of solitude, while also needing to be in touch with his intellectual world. He would go so far as to make copies of all his outgoing letters, so distrustful was he of any mediation. While he constantly sought solitude and had no faith in the possibility of an honest correspondence, he turned out to be remarkably dependent on the mail not only for communication but even for literary inspiration.

Chapter six explores all the tangential associations with the mails, including the postal horn, which announced the arrival of the coach or the pouch, flagging rapidity and dependability, as well as opening

the gates of cities at all hours. Caplan follows this historical detail into the realm of music where he examines the feature of the postal horn in the music of Mozart, Mahler, and Schubert, among others. Furthermore, when mail began to circulate within a city, this movement of carriers was accompanied and announced by the sound of a clapper that entered the repertoire of identifiable and meaningful public sounds. The development of the postal system also affected an individual's relation to time and space. Distinctions between public and private would need to be renegotiated and redefined; physical distance no longer meant emotional or intellectual distance; time would come to feel unbearably long when waiting for a much-desired letter, or very short when dreading an unwelcome one. The post came to cover great distances with a rapidity heretofore unknown. Roads were improved, and the infrastructure generally allowed for greater efficiency in the system. Nevertheless, the literate elite benefited most fully from this new postal system. Newspapers and clocks also came to be greatly affected by the importance of reach and timing. A new emotion developed, one not known until the mid-seventeenth century: impatience. Postal carriers came to be recognized and revered as the epitome of "consistency, predictability, and trustworthiness," (p.192) much as we still regard them, even if today's deliveries consist mainly of unwelcome catalogues, coupons, and bills. The questions of surveillance, privacy, and secrecy in our time appear to be no longer playing out around our mail, but instead around our email.

Weaknesses in the book are few and far between. It is wonderful that Caplan folds into his narrative the origins of certain expressions that were hitherto unknown to me, even though I have used them regularly without thinking, such as: a "*poulet*" (p. 73) or "*passer comme une lettre à la poste*" (p. 85), but simply mentioning "postal alchemy" (p. 12) is insufficient for understanding the process whereby a *lettre de change* was transformed into money.^[1] And of course, given that Caplan is a distinguished scholar of French culture, literary theory, and history, with a specialization in the eighteenth century, it is no surprise that the major focus of his book is the French postal system in the enlightenment period. He gives somewhat shorter shrift to the other European countries included in the title's promise. That said, he has still done an admirable job of extending his range to especially the seventeenth century, and balancing his expert view on France with research into the mails of the Habsburg Empire and the United Kingdom, as well as Denmark, Russia, and Venice.

The foremost strength of this book is that it successfully combines thoroughness and readability. It is a real pleasure to find so much relevant material gathered together around the history and practice of the epistolary genre and such a great early modern story made of it. It is a welcome addition to the literature on the subject already extant. Caplan has searched well and wide and has used his findings wisely. He has cited the most important cultural historians and literary critics on the subject, and he has made their research and thinking available to readers of English. The book will be of benefit to a wide variety of readers: undergraduates, graduate students, and fully formed scholars alike. It is a great addition to the growing library of cultural studies concentrated on the early modern era. Finally, the book helps us in our consideration of where we stand today in relation to our current communications systems by offering perspectives on our past. We've come a long way. Or have we? What have we gained as our communication system has evolved? Just as importantly, what have we lost?

NOTE

[1] Readers also may not fully agree with Caplan's endorsement of Duchêne's position that Madame de Sévigné and her daughter Madame de Grignan were doing their best to conduct a completely private conversation by letter. For a more nuanced treatment of this question, see my *Performing Motherhood: The Sévigné Correspondence* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991), especially chapter five: "Private and Public—The Space Between."

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