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Robert Darnton, *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. vi + 224 pp. Photographs, figures, notes, and index. \$25.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-674-05715-9.

Review by Lauren Clay, Vanderbilt University.

Robert Darnton frames his short and engaging new book *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris* around a detective story. In July 1749, the Paris police arrested an unsuspecting thirty-one-year-old medical student named François Bonis and secretly brought him to the Bastille for questioning. His crime was reciting and circulating an “abominable poem” that openly attacked the king (p. 7). Bonis’s arrest quickly led to a string of others as the lieutenant general of police, under direct orders from Versailles, attempted to trace this “infamous piece” back to its original author (p. 11). In the end, the police failed to identify the author of the ode. Yet, before the trail went cold, they filled the cells of the royal prison with fourteen ordinary Parisians who happened to be purveyors of illicit political poems and songs.

The “Affair of the Fourteen,” as this case came to be known, attracted Darnton’s attention because it was “the most extensive police operation” that he had encountered in his many years of archival research—no small claim coming from an historian intimately familiar with the activities of the Paris police (p. 2). No less intriguing, one might imagine, was the fact that the Affair’s dossiers documented in tantalizing detail the widespread circulation of subversive speech and song at a time of political crisis. In the course of the investigation, the police identified six different forbidden verses in the possession of the Fourteen. Following in the footsteps of detectives investigating sedition more than two and a half centuries ago, Darnton reconstructs the web of exchanges through which these poems were recited, committed to memory, written down on scraps of paper, passed along to friends and acquaintances, embellished, and even set to popular tunes. He then skillfully deploys this rich material to illuminate the complex communication networks that shaped public opinion in pre-Revolutionary Paris.

*Poetry and the Police* begins with a deceptively simple question: “Why were the authorities, those in Versailles as well as those in Paris, so intent on chasing after poems?” (p. 3). Publicly maligning the king, it is true, was a serious crime, and the Paris police had long been charged with monitoring *mauvais propos*, or seditious speech, as part of their regular duties. Yet, the question remains: why such an extensive police dragnet just to bring in an assortment of seemingly innocuous law clerks, priests, and students?

To get to the heart of the matter, Darnton brings multiple perspectives to bear on the Affair. He investigates the Fourteen, their relationships with one another, their political sensibilities, and the life-altering punishments they received for doing something that so many other Parisians were also doing: criticizing the king. He then situates the Affair within the context of unfolding political crisis. In 1749, Louis XV confronted a groundswell of popular discontent stemming from an unpopular peace treaty, an unpopular tax hike, and an unpopular royal mistress, Madame de Pompadour. Popular disdain and anger, directed even at the king himself, found

voice in political verses and songs that could be heard all around Paris at this time, comprising what Darnton describes as “a cacophony of sedition set to rhyme” (p. 11). That spring, scandal and political intrigue rocked Versailles when the king exiled his powerful minister Maurepas as punishment for writing songs and poems attacking Pompadour. When a spy reported some weeks later that an individual named François Bonis held in his possession a subversive poem entitled “L’Exil de M. Maurepas” (“The Exile of M. Maurepas”), the Paris police had already begun to crack down on political verse. They were ready to pounce. *Poetry and the Police* then turns to the poems and songs confiscated by the police. Darnton teases out possible points of origin for verses, locates them within a remarkably vibrant and wide-ranging discourse of political satire, and decodes the jokes and jabs they offered. In the final chapters, he turns to the complex matter of reception and influence, asking what these songs can tell us about public opinion in the pre-Revolutionary era.

*Poetry and the Police* constitutes a valuable resource for undergraduate teaching not only in French history classes but also perhaps in courses introducing students to historical research methods. I recommend it for a number of reasons. Darnton, a consummate storyteller, wrote this book to appeal to an audience beyond the scholarly community. As he pursues different leads in his investigation, he spins this micro-historical study into a lively tale filled with colorful anecdotes and scurrilous satire. He frequently adopts a conversational tone as he walks the reader through his process of research and analysis. Many of the key documents of the study, including the texts of the songs and poems distributed by the fourteen, are reproduced in their original French in the book’s extensive end matter. Darnton even goes a step further by inviting readers to engage more directly with this subversive song culture through an innovative electronic supplement. After identifying twelve of the most important political songs circulating in Paris around 1750, he arranged for them to be recreated in a spectacular recording by cabaret singer Hélène Delavault and guitarist Claude Pavy.[1]

The book’s most expansive claim—that communications networks offering up-to-date political commentary were alive and vital in eighteenth-century Paris, centuries before the advent of email, texting, and tweeting—may come as more of a surprise to students born in the age of the internet than to historians of this era. Yet, by carefully reconstructing and analyzing an oral communication network at work, Darnton has created a book that has much to offer scholars as well. *Poetry and the Police* convincingly argues that oral exchanges constituted an essential means by which political information circulated, particularly in semi-literate societies like ancien régime France. Its focus on personal, face-to-face political exchanges is particularly welcome because “orality” (as Darnton terms it) has received surprisingly little attention from historians. The principal reason, as he notes, is that the spoken word typically leaves few traces in the source record, giving historians little to work with. A contributing factor may well be the intense scholarly interest in written political discourse as well as print capitalism in recent decades. Indeed, for a scholar who has devoted so much of his career to the history of the book, *Poetry and the Police*’s emphasis on speech and song constitutes something of a departure. The fact that scholarship in this domain remains underdeveloped makes it all the more surprising that Darnton chose not to cite Arlette Farge’s path-breaking *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France*, which also draws on the dossiers of seditious remarks in the police archives to examine Parisian public opinion of this era, providing a valuable counterpoint to *Poetry and the Police*. [2]

Darnton’s goal of tracing oral communications in everyday practice leads him to step back from the theories of Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas that have powerfully framed scholarship on public opinion in pre-Revolutionary France. [3] Although he acknowledges the value of each of these perspectives, he argues that scholars encounter problems “when we attempt to align theoretical issues with empirical research” (p. 14). As a result, Darnton approaches

communications not as a discursive field or a sphere for the exchange of rational opinions, but rather as a series of personal exchanges in which the content takes on meaning within specific historical and social contexts.

The eighteenth-century Parisian communications network brought to life in *Poetry and the Police* is wide-ranging, extending “from the palace of Versailles to the furnished rooms of the Parisian poor” (p. 55). Elites and members of the popular classes frequently drew upon and enjoyed a common repertory of illicit political satire and criticism. Where did these provocative verses originate? Although one prolific libeler and a handful of would-be authors do make very brief appearances in the book, the answer does not lie in a nascent Grub Street. In fact, Darnton suggests that much of this mid-century poetry was composed at Versailles by courtiers with a political ax to grind. According to contemporaries, these rumor-filled verses were secretly disseminated among the popular classes in Paris so that they could later be “discovered” as the word on the street, the voice of the common people. Once unleashed, poems could and often did take on a life of their own as they were adapted and expanded to speak to new political circumstances. Darnton illustrates this process by comparing multiple variants of influential songs. The most widely circulated of the works confiscated among the Fourteen, a popular song entitled “Qu’une batarde de catin” (“That a bastard strumpet”) proved so flexible that it expanded into a veritable “sung newspaper,” providing up-to-date commentary on the political happenings of the day (p. 78).

Darnton’s finely grained analysis of music is one of the highlights of *Poetry and the Police*. Although music does not appear in the book’s title, it occupies a central place in this study. Satire and criticism travelled most quickly and widely when verses were set to simple melodies borrowed from well-known songs. Darnton turns to contemporary song collections known as *chansonniers* to track the popularity of various seditious songs and to evaluate them in the context of other poems, jokes, and songs from the era. He then uses “keys,” compendiums that link song titles with their musical annotation, to match his verses to the tunes to which they would have been sung. Darnton suggests subtle ways in which these stock melodies enhanced the meanings of political songs, including by carrying within them the echoes of earlier sets of lyrics.

By tracing the circulation of verses that were sung and recited as well as transcribed, *Poetry and the Police* sheds light on ways in which oral and written communications proved mutually reinforcing. It also succeeds in further eroding the boundaries between elite and popular political culture in this era. Where this book proves less successful is in shedding light on seditious speech among the illiterate, the poor, or even the working classes. The Affair of the Fourteen, as Darnton notes, was confined by and large to the Latin Quarter, and the priests and students apprehended were highly literate and skilled in memorization. For this reason, the book falls somewhat short on its claim to illuminate communications in a “semi-literate” society. At the same time, Darnton equivocates on the relative authority that courtly elites who composed devastating little ditties or educated disseminators like the Fourteen may have exercised within oral communications networks in shaping contemporary public opinion.

This brings one back to perhaps the central question of the book. What impact did this Parisian oral communications network have? For one thing, the king himself listened—at times obsessively—to the extremely critical political discourse it circulated. Louis XV was even known to respond with policies intended to curry favor with *le public*, giving that public a degree of real power. This leads Darnton to conclude that “M. le Public existed long before the philosophers wrote treatises about public opinion” (p. 139).<sup>[4]</sup> At the same time, he carefully argues that 1749 should not be seen as a rehearsal for 1789. François Bonis and the others rounded up in this police investigation harbored no revolutionary sentiments. The criticism

they and many other Parisians offered of royal policies and even of the king himself, although strongly voiced, cannot be equated with the self-consciously wielded public opinion of the pre-Revolution.

Yet, if the political crisis of 1749 did not set France on a long path to Revolution, this is not to say that this outpouring of scandalous poems and songs had no long-term political impact. Darnton argues that oral attacks on the king, his mistress, and the scandal-ridden court proved significant in framing the ways kingship was perceived. In the songs and poems of 1749, Louis XV appears again and again as a feeble, isolated idiot. The cumulative weight of these subversive verses, according to Darnton, fixed him as such in collective memory. In the anti-royalist literature of the 1780s, Louis XV was remembered as much through these critical songs as through his deeds. Moreover, in the new political context of the pre-Revolution, the criticisms spoken and sung so widely in the capital a half-century earlier could be interpreted as a turning point, a moment when the French began to abandon their allegiance to their king (p. 122). By eavesdropping on the Parisian public of 1749 and exploring ways in which its oral networks constituted and amplified public opinion, *Poetry and the Police* offers up a fresh perspective on the political culture of the Old Regime.

#### NOTES

[1] This electronic cabaret can be accessed at the web site <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/darpoee/>. Accessed 5/31/11. The lyrics to these songs are included both in French and English translation in the book's end matter.

[2] The book engages only lightly with scholarship on public opinion and the political culture of the Old Regime, with Darnton choosing to focus closely on the Affair of the Fourteen. He does cite other works by Arlette Farge, but not *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France*, trans. Rosemary Morris (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1994), originally published as *Dire et mal dire: L'opinion public au XVIIIème siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1992). Recent scholarship points to theatrical performances as a potential site for accessing the kind of politicized "orality" that Darnton evokes. See Sara Beam, *Laughing Matters: Farce and the Making of Absolutism in France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007); and Jeffrey Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[3] Michel Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); and Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992).

[4] This can be seen as a mild rebuttal of the Foucauldian discourse analysts, who have argued that we cannot speak of the existence of "public opinion" until the term was invented—and the concept developed and given political authority by philosophers—which only happened in the second half of the eighteenth century. This position was articulated most influentially by Keith Michael Baker in *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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