Rumour and Politics

Abstract

This article examines the historiography of rumour and its relationship to other disciplines, particularly psychology. The article explores the methodological problems of defining rumours and interpreting source material, as well as the limitations of psychological interpretations. It examines the ways in which rumours can allow us to access pass mentalities and understand popular and elite politics. It analyses attempts by governments to monitor rumours and what they can tell us about the relationship between the individual and the state. Finally, it explores how the interpretations of rumours shaped, and were shaped by, race, gender, social differences, and cultural attitudes. Although social scientists and historians have approached the study of rumour in very different ways, closer collaboration between the two can illuminate our understanding of this complex and fascinating phenomena.

Introduction

The circulation of rumours and the assessment of news is a pressing public issue. The easy accessibility of information and misinformation via the internet has created a news culture in which rumours spread rapidly and individuals can easily find 'facts' to support their conspiracy theory of choice. Although the internet has provided a forum for whistle-blowing and created opportunities for 'citizen journalism', it has also damaged the ability of traditional media to investigate reports and sift fact from fiction by depriving newspapers of readers and advertising revenues. At the same time, the pressure on twenty-four hour news channels to broadcast stories before fully checking facts has led to an increase in the circulation of misinformation. Alan Rusbridger, the editor of *The Guardian*, recently raised fears that, 'for the first time since the Enlightenment, it's possible to imagine societies — towns, cities, and even countries — without any agreed or verifiable forms of the truth'.[1] We might question whether 'agreed or verifiable forms of the truth' have ever existed, and doubt the accuracy and social utility of traditional media. Nevertheless, fears remain that the continuing decline of print and TV journalism could create a much more fragmented and unmediated news culture.

Rumour has always been an urgent concern, connected intimately with the politics of governance, the construction of community, and notions of state stability. This article will examine the disparate historiography of rumour and its relationship to other disciplines, notably psychology. While historians and social scientists have adopted very different approaches towards understanding rumours, they have each influenced the other, and even closer collaboration between the two could greatly

enhance our understanding of this endlessly fascinating phenomenon. At the same time, historians need to challenge generalised notions underpinning experimental psychology to point to a more differentiated engagement with rumour that is dependent on varied cultural norms and distinctive temporal contexts.

Methodological problems

Georges Lefebvre's examination of the 'Great Fear' of 1789 was in some respects a false dawn for the study of rumour. Lefebvre was able to chart rumours concerning the imminent attack of 'brigands' and foreign mercenaries across France in 1789 in impressive detail, demonstrating how popular fears influenced the course of the French Revolution. By using rumour to examine collective mentalities, Lefebvre appeared to offer a methodology that could fruitfully be applied to other periods, yet initially, few historians seemed interested in replicating his approach. Early claims that historians failed to respond to Lefebvre's clarion call are no longer sustainable, however.[2] In fact, the mobilization of rumour across history's many sub-disciplines has provided a rich and complex discussion about its place in understanding popular belief systems, behaviours, and dominant mentalities, as well as questioning the psychological function of rumour transmission. However, the field is characterised more by its diversity than its ability to provide a distinctive methodological model that can be generically applied. While the historical specificity of any given region or period raises its own issues and complications, there is a common set of methodological problems that confront the historian of rumour.

The first is that of definition.[3] What distinguishes rumour from gossip, speculation, and early articulations of 'news'? While gossip is socially and culturally important, it generally concerns information about the personal lives of individuals and circulates in small communities. Rumours, on the other hand, might circulate on a national or international scale and often relate to collective hopes and fears that reach beyond the moral behaviour of individuals. While news generally denotes information that has been confirmed or generally accepted as true, rumour refers to uncertain or unverified information.

While excessively broad definitions of rumour render the term meaningless, preventing us from identifying the phenomena we are trying to analyse, more specific definitions tend to fall apart on closer inspection. Rumours overlap with other forms of communication, and exceptions abound. A rumour that a monarch has a new mistress, for instance, might be categorised as both 'gossip' within the court and 'rumour' beyond it. Furthermore, if we are to define rumours as uncertain or unverified news, almost all reports could be categorised as such. Indeed it could be argued that all news was initially 'rumour', particularly in the predominantly oral

news cultures of the past. The marginal annotations of seventeenth-century news diarists, who wrote 'proved true' or 'false' next to reports, indicates that information only attained the status of fact after it had been confirmed days or weeks later.[4] The sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani has argued that rumours only become news when a stable consensus about their truth is reached.[5] One might ask whether a unanimous consensus about the veracity of a report ever develops, since there will always be those who believe in the truth of a rumour long after others have ceased to believe it.

Leonard W. Doob's assertion that 'a clear-cut definition of propaganda is neither possible nor desirable' could be applied equally to rumour.[6] Any commitment to a single root meaning of the term merely invites endless and unprofitable semantic debate and risks excluding reports that we would intuitively describe as 'rumours'. Rumours are typically, but not exclusively, unverified or uncertain, and concern matters that are important to large numbers of people, beyond the personal behaviour of individuals. Individual reports can exhibit features that are more or less characteristic of this ideal type.[7]

The second major methodological problem historians face relates to the body of material on which to draw. Rumour is often, by its very nature, difficult to capture: it is ephemeral and frequently perceived as inconsequential, not worthy of entering the record. In any case, it is primarily transferred orally. When rumour is recorded, how do we know what has been lost? Rumours have been used to recover the voices of ordinary people, yet they are often recorded in the official documents of regimes that sought to monitor or punish those who spread seditious reports. There are formidable methodological difficulties in recovering authentic plebeian voices that have been filtered through elite sources, and there is a danger of repeating early modern elite stereotypes about the susceptibility of the uneducated multitude to false news. As Adam Fox has pointed out, early modern government records tend to preserve only the most extreme and dangerous words spoken by ordinary people, although a careful reading allows us to discern more measured criticisms.[8] Does the relative abundance or dearth of government evidence for different periods reflect the volume of rumours circulating, the extent of government concern about them, or is it simply an artefact of improved bureaucratic processes and the survival of source material?

Why do some rumours persist and others fade? And when rumours are resurrected in new contexts, has the fundamental character of the rumour changed? How do historians trace the origins and provenance of a rumour, so crucial to understanding its intention? Indeed, does intention even matter, if we consider the process of rumour transmission the more historically significant? How do rumours

travel? Can we map the course of a rumour, and what does its trajectory reveal? Even if historians could overcome such challenges, is it helpful or desirable to force such a complex phenomenon into an artificial theoretical or interpretative framework? Rumour is far too fragmented and contradictory. As Luise White concludes in her study of rumours of Vampirism in colonial Africa, 'there is no single correct interpretation of any single rumour; there are interpretations and contextualisations instead'.[9] Arguably historians should seek out and embrace the ambiguities and fractures within the content and passage of rumours, alongside the resonances and continuities, in order to understand, as Nick Stargardt suggests, the 'profoundly dissonant qualities of human subjectivity'.[10] It is, after all, rumour's ability to hold all these elements in tension with one another that make it a particularly appealing, if complicated, object for historical study.

Despite the methodological difficulties inherent in any study of rumour, historians of the phenomenon remain convinced of its fundamental significance to the political process, identity formations, societal dynamics, and an understanding of individual and collective behaviours and mind-sets. Rumour may be a window onto prevailing mentalities and belief systems, the attempt by the disenfranchised to articulate their views, and a mechanism for those views to enter the public sphere. Rumours are generated by deep-seated psychological needs, and while those needs are difficult to interpret, they provide an opportunity to access lost mentalities and forgotten constituencies.

Psychology

Historians have tended to focus on two foundational psychological studies to inform their discussion of rumour, both borne of the experience and so-called 'lessons' of war. The first, Gordon Allport's and Leo Postman's *The Psychology of Rumor,* published in 1947, used experimental research, alongside knowledge of psychoanalysis and (often anecdotal) insights gleaned from wartime 'rumour-clinics' that attempted to monitor and contain damaging reports, to understand the mechanisms through which rumours spread. They attempted to recreate in an experimental setting the process of communication through which rumours were thought to emerge. A test subject was shown an ambiguous image of an everyday scene and asked to describe it to someone else from memory. The second person would then relay what they had been told to a third, without reference to the original image, and without being able to question or clarify the description they were given. When the descriptions given by each subject were compared, they were shown to become shorter, more memorable and less ambiguous as they were passed on. Subjects increasingly imputed meaning to events and motives to the people depicted in the scenes, and the descriptions became distorted, exaggerated and simplified in accordance with the subjects' pre-existing beliefs and prejudices.

Allport's and Postman's work in itself becomes a revealing object of historical study, since it reflected both official anxieties over the impact of rumours on civilian morale in a time of 'total war' alongside an optimism about the ability of science and the state to understand and solve human problems, in keeping with trends in sociology, social psychology, and political science following the First World War.[11] However, as a template for probing the psychology of rumour, it is insufficient. While some elements of their work anticipated the more nuanced research that was to follow, Allport and Postman presented rumour as a pathological and irrational distortion of the truth, a further reflection of scientific and popular obsessions following the trauma of two wars and the 'revelations' of supposed 'falsehoods in wartime'. Consequently, their approach was reductionist, presenting rumour as the result of individual psychological traits and errors of communication.[12] Overly dependent on scientism, they used an equation, '$r = i \times a$' to describe the conditions in which rumours arose, where 'i' is the importance of a topic and 'a' is the ambiguity that surrounds it. While this gave their argument a specious air of mathematical rigour, complex human interactions such as the process of rumour-formation cannot be reduced to simple generalizable laws.

Moreover, their experimental approach simplified the process of transmission to such a degree that it bore little resemblance to reality, and it tells us much more about the unreliability of eyewitness testimony than it does about the circulation or rumour. In reality, rumours are not simply spread from one person to another in a serial chain. Individuals check information, clarify reports and gather news from multiple sources. They are much more concerned with the accuracy of reports, which affect both their own view of the world and their credibility with others, than Allport's and Postman's disinterested test subjects. The overall effect was to present those who spread rumours as rather more credulous and irrational than they really were.[13]

The second seminal work for historians of rumour, Tamotsu Shibutani's *Improvised News: a sociological study of rumor* in 1966, was also influenced by the experience of the Second World War, although these led Shibutani to very different conclusions.[14] As a young Japanese-American man, he had been interned shortly after the U.S. joined the war, and had witnessed the rumours that circulated within the Japanese community as it attempted to understand and come to terms with internment.[15] Shibutani was thus an observer and participant in the process of rumour formation, and based his conclusions on real-life examples rather than experimental data. He characterised the circulation of rumours as a process through which individuals collectively formulated explanations for ambiguous situations. While Allport and Postman tended to present rumours as potentially dangerous, irrational, and pathological, Shibutani argued that they were part of the normal and self-correcting process through which communities attempted to explain events.

While Allport and Postman were concerned with managing rumours and preventing them from spreading, Shibutani argued that the spread of rumours was uncontrollable.[16] Attempting to plant a rumour was pointless, because it would only catch on under the same conditions in which it would have developed spontaneously anyway.[17] Official denials were often counter-productive, and attempts to manage rumours were likened to trying to stop a lynch mob.[18] In general, Shibutani presented an optimistic view of the collective, democratic process of sense-making and the futility of attempts by governments to control or manipulate opinion.

Despite the fact that psychological studies have arguably moved on since the 1960s, historians have placed disproportionate emphasis on Allport's, Postman's, and Shibutani's research. This is partly because their findings remained the prevailing orthodoxy until the 1990s. And while more recent scholarship has attempted to test or elaborate on the work of Allport, Postman and Shibutani, or reconcile their different approaches, progress has been incremental: no single work has advanced our understanding so profoundly as these foundational texts. Nonetheless, while scholars such as Ralph Rosnow have challenged the dominance of scientism and have embraced Shibutani's model of rumour as a 'sense-making' activity, psychologists have still tended to treat rumours as dangerous and have increasingly focused on practical ways in which businesses and other organisations can manage them.[19] Historical studies point to rather different conclusions. Social scientific approaches often present rumour as a timeless and universal phenomenon and are dependent on isolated and de-contextualised historical examples. Historians reject the notion of rumour as a solely trans-national or trans-historical phenomenon: while aspects of rumour formulation and circulation may transcend national and temporal boundaries, they continue to recognise the historical specificity of particular rumours. Here, psychological research is transformed into a focus for questions surrounding human behaviour and interaction, power, agency, community formation, government stability, mentalities, and emotions applied to and tested in particular historical contexts and environments. From this basis, historians are able to interpret rumour as reflective of broader notions of continuity and change.

Popular and elite politics

The study of rumour offers a means to examine popular politics, mentalities and behaviours, allowing us to re-insert those without a voice into the historical narrative. While historians once believed that the common people knew little about politics, records of rumours, libels and other seditious speech indicated that the early modern 'public sphere' included those beyond the traditional political elite.[20]

The circulation of political rumours demonstrates that even relatively humble people in late medieval and early modern England were sufficiently well informed to engage in political discussion, even if their views were sometimes distorted.[21] Similar conclusions have been drawn about rumours circulating in France during the latter half of the eighteenth century.[22] Far from being hapless victims and unwitting conduits for rumour, the common people emerge from the historiography as active agents, with the ability to mobilize rumour for their own ends.

Historians of the modern period have similarly invested the masses them with a new significance and agency, challenging existing orthodoxies on power and political will. This had particular resonance in repressive or 'restrictive' environments.[23] Where subversive talk was dangerous, rumour offered the opportunity to express opinion 'at a distance' ('I heard that…'; 'Someone told me that…'). Rumour is, by its very nature' 'cloaked in anonymity', according to Steven Hahn, proving appealing to 'subalterns' in search of fluid, transient and untraceable forms of communication.[24] Hahn argues that for African Americans in the antebellum South rumours of emancipation and the redistribution of plantation land represented a '[safe] way… to introduce themselves as political actors'.[25] Plantation owners went to considerable lengths to hermetically seal their slaves within the South, so as not to expose them to 'seditious' whispers of the Free North.[26] The 'grapevine' – a series of underground 'networks of communication' between captives – bound a disparate community together in which sharing informal news became a form of power, breaking the enforced isolation imposed by the slave owners and providing a means of speculating on the meaning, progress and consequences of the Civil War.[27]

Lynne Viola's work on Stalin's brutal collectivization policies reveal that rumour provided the peasantry with the means of articulating an alternative world-view challenging communism. Rumour permitted a form of resistance in a repressive environment, where dissent activated the mechanisms of the terror state. Strategically placed rumours mobilized folk traditions and religious language to cast collectivization as an apocalyptic act that threatened the existence of the community. In a state where language was power and an indicator of ideological conformity – take, for example, the act of 'speaking Bolshevik'[28] – the peasantry deliberately infused rumours with religious imagery and phraseology as a defiant defence of a past identity that the Soviets sought to erase and in order to legitimize their political claims.[29] This, Viola contends, was a 'language of protest distilled through metaphor… which was both politically expedient and widely understood'. Rumour 'represented a kind of off-stage social space for the articulation of peasant dissent…, a popular forum… in the abstract in which peasants could create and maintain a political dialogue about Soviet power, communism and the collective

farm'.[30] While historians have pointed to the particular resonance of rumours in 'totalitarian' societies, under both dictatorships and liberal democracies, rumour provided a check to state-orchestrated propaganda campaigns, serving as an important corrective to official narratives that the people did not consider credible.[31]

Although rumours reveal that ordinary people often had extensive knowledge about current affairs and were quite capable of engaging in political debate, rumours were also spread by elites. Historians who have relied on the court records of individuals prosecuted for spreading false reports in early modern England have tended to present rumour as an essentially plebeian mode of discourse, and have underestimated the involvement of elites in spreading and exploiting misinformation. Taking their cue from Shibutani, some historians have tended to represent rumour as an uncontrollable popular force. Ethan Shagan has argued that rumours circulating during the reign of Henry VIII were 'the stuff of popular politics'.[32] Because every person who passed on a rumour was free to add their own gloss and manipulate its content and meaning, rumours were 'free from government control, or indeed from any control at all'.[33] 'Inventing a rumour', as Shagan argued, was therefore 'the most insignificant of acts'.[34]

The emphasis on the protean and collective aspect of rumours only tells part of the story, however. While individuals may have had little control over the ways in which rumours spread and were interpreted, they were certainly capable of providing the initial spark without which specific rumours may have lain dormant. Rumours that the Duke of Buckingham had poisoned Charles I that gripped the South-West of England in 1628 had originated when a thief shouted the report to distract a crowd that was pursuing him.[35] There are numerous occasions when members of the social elite appear to have spread false reports deliberately for political purposes, such as in 1470 when Robert Welles, the son of a nobleman, spread the report that Edward IV was coming to Lincolnshire to destroy the commons.[36] Members of the social elite who were in a position of authority, who might have access to reliable information or connections with the court, could also lend popular rumours far greater credibility than they would otherwise have had. This was the case, for instance, with reports about the death of Henry VIII that were spread in the 1530s.[37]

Despite the outward fear and disdain elites expressed for 'vulgar rumours', in practice they were often willing to spread and exploit them for their own political purposes. Rulers from early modern monarchs to twentieth century politicians and dictators could be just as susceptible to rumours as the people they ruled. Rumours that circulated throughout the country often originated at the centre of government, which was itself a site for rumours about the 'who's in and who's out' of factional

politics.[38] False reports about foreign invasions and conspiracies against the government could be spread at court by relatively humble people who expected some reward or wanted to influence policy.[39] Rumours can therefore be seen as the result of a dialogue *between* elite and popular politics.

Rumour and the state

Rumours have the potential to stoke riot and rebellion, and governments throughout history have often attempted to monitor and suppress them. During the medieval and early modern periods, rumours that the monarch had died, that new taxes would be imposed, that a foreign army was about to invade or that a long-dead monarch had returned to claim the throne all had the potential to provoke or legitimate rebellions. Rumours about the morality and sexual behaviour of the monarch could also play a part in undermining royal authority. As a result, medieval and early modern monarchs imposed a series of laws and proclamations aimed at suppressing false rumours and other potentially seditious forms of speech, including libels and political prophecies. While political rumours were certainly not new, some historians have detected an increased concern about them during the fifteenth century in England, perhaps as a result of the crises of legitimacy faced by a succession of Lancastrian and Yorkist kings.[40] The crisis of legitimacy provoked by the reformation intensified these efforts.[41] A rash of new laws were introduced in the 1530s, and there was a sharp increase in the number of prosecutions for various forms of seditious speech. Anxieties about dynastic security under a minor and two female monarchs, as well as the continuing religious divisions that exacerbated the threat of rebellion and foreign invasion, meant that additional laws were introduced by the later Tudors.

Given the potential for rumour to undermine the authority of the State and encourage political intervention from the disenfranchised, modern governments also went to great lengths – particularly at times of war or crisis – to counter the effects of subversive rumours. Psychology was increasingly used, particularly by the mid-20th century, to serve these ends. In such contexts, rumour became associated with the 'Other', with enemies who might spread rumour to undermine morale at times of war or with those seeking to undermine law and order.[42] Regarded as inherently seditious, rumour was perceived as a driver of change, destabilizing civil society. Race riots in 20th century America have proved fertile ground for scholars seeking to demonstrate rumour's potential to incite rebellion: the East St Louis riot (1917), the Chicago riot (1919), the Belle Isle, Detroit, riot (1943), and the Harlem riots (1935-43) were all prompted by rumour.[43] Riots are the physical manifestation of the dissonance between authority and the mass, and point to a perceived failure to deliver justice, protect democratic rights, and ensure representation on the one

hand, and the presence of rebellious intent on the other. The suspicion that the state was stealing the children of the Parisian underclass in 1750 was created by the mistrust of the local police force, while the authorities blamed revolutionary agitators intent on inflaming the masses.[44]

Governments were not always fearful about the threat of seditious rumours, however, and some regimes were capable of taking a more relaxed approach. In *Dangerous Talk,* David Cressy argued that during the eighteenth century, prosecutions in England for seditious words declined and punishments became less severe.[45] The reasons for this apparent decline remain unclear. Perhaps eighteenth-century governments simply had greater means of coercion and were less worried about the threat of popular rebellion. The expansion of the 'public sphere' after the Civil War may have led successive regimes to conclude that false rumours, along with other forms of political discourse, were now impossible to suppress. While governments throughout history have attempted to monitor rumours, it remains to be seen why they generated more concern at certain times and within certain regimes than others. A broad, comparative approach to the history of rumour is required to answer these questions.

While the circulation and monitoring of rumour might seem to imply a simple, adversarial relationship between people and their governments, more recent studies suggest a more complex picture. Rumour can no longer be said simply to divide and destabilize societies or to prompt insurrection and violence. Rumour potentially represents a site for negotiation between the individual and the state, for identity formation, and for engagement with the community. As Andy Wood has argued, the circulation of seditious rumours in early modern England should not lead us to exaggerate the amount of popular opposition to royal policies. The only reason seditious words came to the attention of the government in the first place was because loyal subjects were willing to denounce their neighbours to the authorities.[46] Historians of the modern period, on the other hand, while recognizing that the authorities were more likely to record and emphasise rumours of a politically subversive nature, argue that such rumours were also likely to have been those 'broadcast loudly enough to be heard by local officials… [surviving] the tests of public consumption to emerge unscuttled'. Here the audience is interpreted as a gatekeeper, preserving only those deemed the most politically significant or compelling.[47] Those rumours that do survive, argues Timothy Johnson, do so 'on the basis of natural selection'.[48] Supplementing Viola's identification of rumour as a powerful mechanism for peasant resistance, Johnson has proposed that 'rumours embedded Soviet citizens within Soviet power, rather than [solely] removing them from it. [Rumours] straddled the boundaries between support and resistance, making them an ideal object of the study of the more ambiguous spaces between

internalisation and rejection'.[49] Here, rumour is transformed into a tool for positioning the individual beyond the false dichotomy of 'consent' and terror', as Stargardt has observed of the final days of the Third Reich, allowing for a more sophisticated consideration by historians of the definition of state control and how contemporaries experienced it.[50] Rumour is as much about accommodation as dissent.[51] By understanding it, we understand the dynamics of power and how it is negotiated.

Identity, gender and culture

Rumour, then, does as much to bind the collective as to divide it. It is a means of community construction. Rumours about the corruption and greed of governments or social elites reinforced collective notions about the ways in which politics and social relations should function. Rumours about the private behaviour of prominent individuals reinforced popular notions of morality. The significance of the identification of the 'Brigands' during the Great Fear of 1789, as Ramsey has argued, lay not only in the permanence of the local militia in revolutionary France, as Lefebvre contended, but in 'consensual notions about the production, sale and distribution of the food supply'.[52] Just as communities coalesced around the politics of food and control of resources in France, so too peasants in the Soviet Union relied on a 'thick web of rumour that served to unite the peasantry, allowing it to overcome regional peasant particularlism…. as well as…. social tensions and divisions within villages'.[53] This was not a gentle process, nor one that commanded willing consensus. In this environment, rumour became as much a 'coercive instrument of persuasion to reinforce community norms or ideals of cohesion and unity against the outside' – as of binding residents around a set of collective values.[54] In this way, the study of rumour has much in common with the history of emotions. Rumour has the potential to bind people in much the same way as Barbara H. Rosenwein's notion of 'emotional communities'. Like emotions, rumour is well placed to uncover 'systems of feeling; what… communities… define and assess as valuable or harmful to them …; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognise', and indeed, in rumour, those that they do not even recognise, but that nonetheless may be revealed to the historian.[55]

If rumour serves to illuminate forms of identity construction within communities, what might it reveal of race, class and gender? It is striking that, regardless of period, contemporaries place women at the heart of discussions of rumour. Rumours are frequently gendered: one need only to think of the identification of rumour with the Greco-Roman goddess Fama, and the modern labelling of the phenomenon as 'Dame Rumour'. Women serve as symbolic martyrs

in atrocity stories,[56] as the victims of sexual violence, murder or kidnap,[57] or as especially vulnerable to the effects of rumour. But why do women occupy a special place in the history of rumour? For Farge and Revel, female Parisians of the mid-eighteenth century were in a position to seek out answers to the mystery of the missing children in that they were connected by a domestic network and were politically disenfranchised and thus considered less dangerous to the authorities.[58] Viola's peasant women were grouped with 'marginal figures' – such as vagrants, beggars, and religious crackpots – as 'gullible primitives' who simply transmitted rumour without considering the political consequences, allowing for a focus on the dangers posed by the 'originators' of seditious talk – the kulaks and priests.[59] In the early modern period, it was a common assumption that women were more likely to gossip and to fall prey to the fear and anxiety that rumour induced, and this belief continued into the modern period. Whereas men would rely on 'common sense' to dispel false report, commented Thomas Chadwick, Vicar of All Saints Church in Darlaston, in 1932, 'women are more prone to accept, believe and spread false rumour. The emotional element which is strong in woman also leads her to believe false rumours, especially if they are of a terrifying nature. A woman's feelings govern her actions'.[60] Such comments were, in part, based on assumption that women communicated within 'closed' networks, in which rumours could not be challenged or dispelled and indeed flourished in an environment of shared pre-existing beliefs and prejudices. So too scholars of rumours within different racial communities have explained that 'black and whites are part of communications channels that do not overlap'.[61] Such assumptions, whether true or false, also apply to social groups. During the early modern period, elites identified rumour with the supposedly irrational 'vulgar multitude'. Yet rumours could transcend social boundaries. One of the remarkable aspects of the Great Fear of 1789, as Ramsey has argued, was that the notion of the 'brigand' was feared by local nobles and peasants alike.[62]

Cultural attitudes towards rumour, and how these might have changed over time, play a central role in understanding popular engagement with the phenomenon and what it represented. While the psychological traits and impulses analysed by social scientists may be universal and timeless, the cultural context in which individual rumours are spread, assessed and interpreted is not. As Marc Bloch wrote, 'Clouds have not changed their shapes since the Middle Ages, yet we no longer see in them either magical swords or miraculous crosses'.[63] Hans-Joachim Neubauer's anecdotal and obscurely written *The Rumour: A Cultural History* has not cast much light on the topic.[64] Scholars like Philip Hardie and Keith Botelho have examined representations of rumour in ancient, medieval and early modern plays, prose and poetry with great success, but by focussing on the literary canon they inevitably ignore the ways in which rumour was represented by ordinary people and in other sources.[65]

Conclusion

Clearly, there is much scope for further research on the phenomenon of rumour, particularly given its potential to provide an insight into the most elusive aspects of past mentalities and mindsets. In order to capitalise on the many revealing aspects of rumour as an object of historical study, historians must be willing to accept and work within the silences and tensions inherent in this unique source. At times, rumour sutures (sometimes unconnected) events together in what Shibutani deems an attempt at 'collective problem solving… [where individuals or groups] construe a meaningful interpretation… by pooling intellectual resources';[66] at others, it fragments and challenges such notions, causing confusion and disorientation. Rumours sate the desire for information, a platform for 'improvised news' where official confirmation does not or cannot exist. This provides a form of psychological stability in which events appear to be 'foreseen' or 'predictable'. But we must recognise that these feelings can sit alongside a sense of instability and a deep-seated foreboding. This might explain how, in the midst of the collapse of the Third Reich, 'hope is nurtured' in extreme circumstances by 'utopian fantasy, hard to sustain and often coexisting with equally powerful fears and anxieties'. Rumours express distress, alarm and terror; but also hope, aspiration and wishful thinking. It does not matter to the historian, then, as Viola suggests, who started the rumour, the question becomes who shares it and why. And if we accept that rumour represents a strategy by which agency is sought and that those who pass on rumour do so in order to fulfil a psychological need, then rumour offers a means of probing human behaviours and motivations. It becomes a creative tool for 'reconstructing' past mental maps and understanding how societies interpreted the world around them.

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[1] http://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/oct/06/importance-free-press-alan-rusbridger, accessed 20th October 2014.

[2] See, for example, Clay Ramsey, *The Ideology of the Great Fear. The Soissonnais in 1789* (Baltimore, 1992); Anand A. Yang, 'A Conversation of Rumors: The Language of Popular "Mentalitès" in Late Nineteenth-Century Colonial India', *Journal of Social History*, 20:3 (Spring, 1987), p. 486. For George Lefebvre's original work, see Georges Lefebvre, *La Grande Peur de 1789* (Paris, 1932).

[3] For the difficulty in defining rumours, see Jean-Nöel Kapferer, *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations and Images* (New Brunswick, 1990), ch. 1.

[4] See, for example, Mary Anne Everett Green (ed.) *Diary of John Rous* (Camden 1st Series, vol. 66, 1856); George Roberts (ed.), *The Diary of Walter Yonge* (Camden 1st series, vol. 41, 1848).

[5] Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: a sociological study of rumor* (New York, 1966), pp. 131-2.

[6] Leonard Doob, 'Propaganda', in Erik Barnouw (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, (Oxford, 1989), vol. 3, p. 375.

[7] Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches* (Washington, 2007), pp. 229-30.

[8] Adam Fox, 'Rumour, News and Popular Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1997), pp. 597-620.

[9] Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: rumour and history in colonial Africa* (Berkeley, 2000), p. 85.

[10] Nicholas Stargardt, 'Beyond "Consent" or "Terror": Wartime Crises in Nazi Germany', *History Workshop Journal* 72 (2011), pp. 201-2.

[11] Similar trends may be found, for example, in the study of propaganda: see, Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda and Communication in World History* (Honolulu, 1979); Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (London, 1938); F.C. Bartlett, *Political Propaganda* (London, 1940); F.C. Bartlett, *Psychology and the Soldier* (Cambridge, 1927); Leonard Doob, *Propaganda: its Psychology and Technique* (New York, 1935).

[12] Gordon Allport and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York, 1947).

[13] More recent experimental work has demonstrated that the accuracy of reports improves when test subjects are allowed to clarify what they hear and when the topic is important to them. See Nicholas DiFonzo, *The Watercooler Effect: a psychologist explores the extraordinary power of rumours* (New York, 2008), pp. 161-2.

[14] Shibutani, *Improvised News*.

[15] As Shibutani explained, many of his examples were drawn from his wartime experiences. *Ibid.* p. vii.

[16] For more recent interest in managing rumours, see Ralph Rosnow, 'Inside Rumor: a personal journey', *American Psychologist*, Vol 46(5), May 1991, p. 493; DiFonzo, *The Watercooler Effect*, ch. 8.

[17] Shibutani, *Improvised News*, p. 199.

[18] *Ibid*., pp. 132, 88, 196.

[19] Rosnow, 'Inside Rumor', p. 488.

[20] The historiography of this topic is vast, but some of the most important contributions include F.J. Levy, 'How Information Spread Amongst the Gentry, 1550-1640', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1982), pp. 11-34; Richard Cust, 'News and Politics in Early Seventeenth Century England', *Past and Present* No. 112 (1986), pp. 60-90; Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England' in Lake and Pincus (eds.), *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2007), pp. 1-30.

[21] This point is made in different ways in Fox, 'Rumour, News and Popular Opinion'; Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England* (Oxford, 2000), ch. 7; David Cressy, *Dangerous Talk* (Oxford, 2010); Ethan Shagan, 'Rumours and Popular Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII' In Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 30-66; Charles Ross, 'Rumour, Propaganda and Popular Opinion during the Wars of the Roses' in Ralph A. Griffiths (ed.), *Patronage The Crown and the Provinces* (Gloucester, 1981), pp. 15-32; Simon Walker, 'Sedition and Popular Protest in the Reign of Henry IV', *Past & Present* 166 (2000), pp. 31-65.

[22] T.L. Ewing, *Rumor, diplomacy and war in Enlightenment Paris* (Oxford, 2014); Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the French Revolution,* trans. Claudia Miéville (Cambridge, MA, 1991).

[23] Yang, 'A Conversation of Rumours', p. 486. Yang argues that rumours becomes a particularly useful means of accessing 'popular mentalities in societies characterized by "restricted literacy", where knowledge and information were "socially restricted" by the prevailing power structure'.

[24] Steven Hahn, "Extravagant Expectations' of Freedom: Rumour, Political Struggle, and the Christmas Insurrection Scare of 1865 in the American South', *Past & Present* 157 (Nov., 1997), p. 124.

[25] Hahn, 'Extravagant Expectations', p. 133.

[26] Patricia A. Turner, *I heard it through the grapevine: Rumour in African American Culture* (Berkeley, 1993), p. 35.

[27] Hahn, 'Extravagant Expectations', p. 128.

[28] Steven Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995).

[29] Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 45-65.

[30] Ibid., p. 65

[31] See, for example, David Welch , *Germany, Propaganda and Total War, 1914-1918* (London, 2000), p. 242.

[32] Shagan, 'Rumours and Popular Politics', p. 30.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[35] Fox, 'Rumour, News and Popular Opinion', p. 613.

[36] Ross, 'Rumour, Propaganda and Popular Opinion', pp. 19-20.

[37] G.R. Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 76-7.

[38] For the role of rumour in the formation of government policy and court politics during the reign of James I, see David Coast, *News and Rumour in Jacobean England: Information, court politics and diplomacy, 1618-25* (Manchester, 2014), pp. 82-138; David Coast, 'Misinformation and Disinformation in Late Jacobean Court Politics, 1616-25', *Journal of Early Modern History* 16 (2012), pp. 335-354.

[39] For the role of ordinary people in raising parliamentary fears about Catholic plotting in 1641, see Caroline Hibbard, *Charles I and the Popish Plot* (Chapel Hill (NC), 1983), pp. 189, 198-9.

[40] Ross, 'Rumour, Propaganda and Popular Opinion'; Walker, 'Sedition and Popular Protest'.

[41] Elton, *Policy and Police*, ch. 2.

[42] For an important discussion of the place of rumour and 'informal communication' as a means of understanding the workings of the Stalinist state, see Tadzio Schilling, 'Maechtige Signale. Informelle Kommunikation und Herrschaft an Stalins Hof', *Journal of Modern European History* 10 (2012-13), pp. 320-340.

[43] Gary A Fine and Patricia A. Turner, *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America* (Berkeley, 2000), pp. 44-51; Turner, *I heard it on the grapevine*, pp. 35-52; Janet L. Langlois, 'The Belle Isle Bridge Incident: Legend Dialectic and Semiotic System in the 1943 Detroit Race Riots', *The Journal of American Folklore* 96: 380 (Apr.-June, 1983), pp. 183-199.

[44] Farge and Revel, *The Vanishing Children*.

[45] Cressy, *Dangerous Talk*, pp. 208, 229, 235-9, 254-5.

[46] Andy Wood, "A lyttul worde ys tresson': Loyalty, Denunciation, and Popular Politics in Tudor England', *Journal of British Studies* 48:4 (2009), pp. 837-47.

[47] Yang, 'A Conversation of Rumours', p. 499.

[48] Timothy Johnson, *Being Soviet: identity, rumour, and everyday life under Stalin, 1939-1953* (Oxford, 2011), p. xxxix.

[49] Johnson, *Being Soviet,* p. xxxix.

[50] Stargardt, 'Beyond "Consent" or "Terror"'.

[51] This trend has also been identified in studies of popular humour. See, for example, Jonathan Waterlow, 'Intimating Trust: Popular Humour in Stalin's 1930s', *Cultural and Social History*, 10:2 (2013), pp. 211-229.

[52] Ramsey, *The Ideology of the Great Fear*, p. xix.

[53] Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, p. 46.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Barbara H. Rosenwein, 'Worrying about Emotions in History', *American Historical Review* 107:3 (June, 2002), p. 842.

[56] There is much written of rumours (many later proving to be correct) of violence against women in occupied Belgium and France during the First World War. Such rumours fuelled allied atrocity propaganda. See, for example, John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German atrocities, 1914: a history of denial* (New Haven, 2001); Ruth Harris, 'The "Child of the Barbarian": Rape, Race and Nationalism in France in the First World War', *Past & Present* 141 (1993), pp. 170-206.

[57] A good example here is the story of the 'white woman of Gipps Land' – the rumour that a white woman was being held against her will by the indigenous people of the Australian Bush. This rumour led to an expedition in 1846 to rescue her. She was not found. See, Julie Carr, *The Captive White Woman of Gipps Land: In Pursuit of the Legend* (Melbourne, 2001).

[58] Farge and Revel, *The Vanishing Children*, pp. 97- 99.

[59] Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, pp. 61-2.

[60] Thomas Chadwick, *The Influence of Rumour on Human Thought and Action* (Manchester, 1932), p. 75.

[61] Fine and Turner, *Whispers,* p. 80.

[62] Ramsey, *The Ideology*, pp. xxiv-xxv.

[63] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester, 1992), p. 88. Bloch's work was originally published in France in 1949 and in English in 1954.

[64] Hans-Joachim Neubauer, *The Rumour: A Cultural History* (London, 1999)

[65] Philip Hardie, *Rumour and Renown* (Cambridge, 2012); Keith M. Botelho, *Renaissance Earwitness: Rumor and Early Modern Masculinity* (New York, 2009).

[66] Shibutani, *Improvised News.*