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Natalie Burda

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Abstract

This article discusses a book written by Robert Darnton on the subject of illegal books in the time of the French Revolution. It also discusses the illegal book trade itself, and perhaps that some of the criticism of Darnton may be because his book shakes the preconceived notions about how the French Revolution started.

Books Make the World Go 'Round: The Illegal Book Trade that Started the French Revolution

By Natalie Burda

“In an era when television and radio did not challenge the supremacy Of the printed world, books aroused emotions and Stirred thoughts with a power we can only Imagine today.”

- Robert Darnton

The revolution that shook France from 1789 to 1802 has long been a source of intriguing historical debates. The question, ‘what actually caused the Revolution?’ has frequently been discussed, but it was Robert Darnton who cracked open the door to the unseen world of the cultural and literary conditions of Pre-Revolutionary France. His knowledge about the illegal book trade has proved a watershed of information. All of Darnton’s works are insightful, but his most recent work, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, captures the essence of his contribution to scholarship.

For the past twenty-five years, Robert Darnton has spent his spare time in Switzerland at the Societe Typographique de Neuchatel (STN), the largest Swiss publisher and book wholesaler.¹ There he has dusted off the large ledgers that hold vast amounts of information. While Darnton studied the lists of books in the records, he discovered a wonderful and dark secret. The French had organized and operated a system in which illegal or forbidden books were printed and distributed.

When Louis XIV began to reconstruct the French government in 1661, he desired to be an absolute monarch. To achieve this end, he took severe measures in order to control the press and the flow of ideas. Louis XIV reorganized the book trade into a process that incorporated great censorship and utilized a regiment of police to enforce his new measures. These restrictive policies drove libelists “underground” or out of the country. “Thus, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, a genre was established; (certain books) had been branded as seditious by the state; and the way was cleared for the clandestine best-sellers of the Pre-Revolutionary era.”² But what exactly were the best sellers? Generally historians have credited Voltaire and Rousseau with being the most popular Enlightenment authors. While Darnton does recognize the popularity of these writers, he claims that the best-seller list included many more authors and a larger spectrum of topics than typically imagined.³

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¹ Joshua Cole, “Porn to the Throne,” *Village Voice*, Vol. 40 Issue 19, 8

² Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1996), 200

³ Darnton, 27-27

The censor police had been given such specific information as to what to confiscate that the entire system proved ineffective. "The distinctions disintegrated into a confusion of overlapping, inconsistent terms; and in the end the classification system collapsed into a undifferentiated mass of 3,544 entries with only one characteristic in common: they smelled somehow of illegality."⁴ Literature containing slander against the king, government, church and clergy were most obviously confiscated. However, this is exactly what the literate French wanted to read about. Booksellers did not let the censorship stop the flow of these desired books. They developed a code system through which forbidden books could be purchased.

Each bookseller received a catalogue of the books that the distributor had to offer. At the end of the catalogue was a special section titled "Livres Philosophiques."⁵ This heading listed all illegal books, from material that denied church authority to raw pornography.⁶ In addition to classifying the books as philosophical, the distributors "married" these works. To "marry" a book was to intermingle the sheets of the illegal book into the pages of a legal one.⁷ As a result of the extraordinary efforts of distributors, forbidden books flowed through France.

Yet one wonders why the French would go through so much trouble to receive a book that, if they were caught with it, could send them to the galleys. Darnton suggests that by putting so many restrictions on the subject material of books, "the regime ruled out self-restraint...by forcing philosophy into the same corner as pornography, [the government] invited the uninhibited attacks that it received."⁸ And these "uninhibited attacks" came in various written forms. The private lives of the King and the Bourbon family became favorite topics for entertaining the literate. Authors created imaginary worlds containing "evil ministers, intriguing courtiers, depraved mistresses, and bored, ineffectual Bourbons."⁹ Darnton notes that after years of the French reading this sort of slanderous material about the King, "something fundamental in the people's attachment to the monarchy" had been damaged.¹⁰

The respect the people held for the King further degraded as the forbidden books actually molded public opinion. They shaped public opinion by preserving and spreading ideas and by transforming loose narratives into coherent discourses.¹¹ As the accounts of the King's life were being published in formal, believable forms, the middle and upper classes began to believe this literature. With this transformation of thought, Darnton observes that "a political system may be most

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⁴ Darnton, 4

⁵ Darnton, 9

⁶ Darnton, 8

⁷ Darnton, 17.

⁸ Darnton, 82.

⁹ Darnton, 77.

¹⁰ Darnton, 225.

¹¹ Darnton, 191.

endangered when its most favored elite classes ceases to believe in its legitimacy.”¹² The French monarchy lost the support of the upper classes to books that were “sold under the cloak.”¹³ The author of *The Anatomy of Revolution*, Crane Brinton, further supports this assertion by Darnton. Brinton is noted for his theory on how revolutions are broken down into specific stages. He believes that it is in stage one that the intellectual upper classes are more critical than supportive of the existing regime.

Knowing that illegal literature did change public sentiments, the question of what might have contributed to the cause of the French Revolution may be revisited. Darnton believes that “do books cause revolutions?” is a question *mal posee*, a question framed incorrectly.¹⁴ The real debate should focus more on what ideas were being read and how widespread the Enlightenment was.¹⁵ Darnton discusses the problems of trying to guess the eighteenth century reader response to the forbidden literature and ideas. He does not definitely answer his question, but he does prove, through lists found at the STN, that large amounts of illegal material were circulated that in fact influenced public opinion.

Despite the vast amount of information Darnton accounts for, there are some gaps. Historian and author Jeremy Popkin notices that Darnton did not attempt to estimate what proportion of the books sold in France were actually *livres philosophiques*. Without these statistics, there is no basis for “deciding whether illegal books were French reader’s daily bread or whether they constituted a minor element in the country’s overall reading diet.”¹⁶ Another contemporary critic, Joshua Cole, complained that Darnton did not answer the questions about the relationships of sex, desire and gender to politics. Cole believes that until these questions are answered in a “more convincing fashion, Darnton’s work can only be seen as a departure point.”¹⁷ Furthermore, according to critic P.N. Furbank, Darnton’s approach to explaining public opinion about the context of the illegal literature seems to “imply that the eighteenth century French were utterly alien to us and only to be made understandable by some mighty effort of historical reconstruction.”¹⁸ Furbank argues that most books do not lose their meaning, even over hundreds of years, and that the illegal books of Pre-Revolutionary France can still be read and understood.

Darnton is limited to the resources that still remain, but he has researched and accounted for all that has been made available to him. Books may not lose meaning over the years, but Darnton was correct in trying to understand the mind frame of the eighteenth century French reader. His book was exciting, even mesmerizing. It truly captured the essence of the zeitgeist. Supporter Linda Kirk said

¹² Darnton, 193.

¹³ Darnton, 3.

¹⁴ Darnton, 181.

¹⁵ Darnton, 182.

¹⁶ Jeremy Popkin, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 1991, 101-102

¹⁷ Cole, 10.

¹⁸ P.N. Furbank, “Nothing Sacred,” *New York Review of Books*, June 8, 1995, 53

that the only reason historians criticize Darnton is because he has ruffled their feathers by sidelining their traditional explanations for the French Revolution.¹⁹ Robert Darnton's research was phenomenal and profound; no other historian has studied the actual evidence as thoroughly as he has. The evidence provided in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* by Robert Darnton truly is watershed. He is in a class of his own.

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¹⁹ Linda Kirk, "Dirty Books and French Revolutionaries," *Contemporary Review*, January 1997,97