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# FRAGILE LIVES

*Violence, Power and Solidarity  
in Eighteenth-Century Paris*



Arlette Farge

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Eighteenth-Century Paris*

Arlette Farge

Translated by Carol Shelton

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# Introduction

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This book was born out of the archives – not from a set of documents, nor from chronicles, memoirs, novels or treatises of a judicial, administrative or literary nature. No, none of these.

It came quite simply from the judicial archives – the odd scrap, snatch of a phrase, fragments of lives from that vast repository of once-pronounced words that constitute the archives – words emerging from the darkness and depths of three successive night-times: of time and oblivion; of the wretched and unfortunate; and last (and most impenetrable for our own stubborn minds), the night of guilt and its grip. Such are the archives, or as Michel Foucault has put it: ‘Lives of a few brief lines or pages; misfortunes and mishaps without number, all bundled together in a handful of words . . . Inglorious lives put to rest in the few brief lines that brought them down.’<sup>1</sup>

Historians who find themselves caught up with original sources become so fascinated by the archives that involvement with them makes it almost impossible to avoid self-justification through them or to resist the temptation to suppress any doubts these might cast on their own perceptions and systems of rationality or those of others. The impact the archives have on the historian (scarcely ever recognized explicitly) sometimes has the effect of actually denying their value. Fine though they might be, they are nonetheless full of pitfalls, and the corollary of their beauty is their deceptiveness. Any historian taking them on board cannot but be wary of the improbable outlines of the images they conceal.

This ambiguous relationship with the archives, resulting from various movements and ideological trends, has marked the course and development of historical writing over a long period. That is to say, one could, if one so chose, study recent trends in historical writing by means of an analysis of the successive tensions that history has created between itself

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and the archives. It was, for instance, in the hope of breaking free from the imperialism of a certain type of social and economic history, as well as from the somewhat tedious history of ideas, that the history of 'mentalities' came into being.

Fundamental to this approach was the conviction that the 'everyday' could be discovered in whatever one happened to glean from the individual subjects of history; that priority should be given to sources which hitherto had not been considered as such; and that one should no longer work on the 'great' figures and 'grand' events of history, but with 'the odd word here and there'.<sup>2</sup> Beliefs, emotions, the irrational and the marginal came along to lend colour to a view of the world which had hitherto been portrayed solely through the ideas of the great and mighty. An average man was constructed who was supposedly representative of a certain type of society; and the metaphors used for this discovery were those of the apparent and the visible, of light and dark. The archives reigned supreme.

But then our sight became blurred and our spirits recoiled before this over-generalized elaboration of the ordinary, everyday man as the typical portrait of a nation or epoch, and hence the arrival on the scene of the extreme, the atypical and the extraordinary which became in their turn some of the standards by which social complexities might be assessed. And once again in order that the historian's irrepressible urge to avoid wandering too far afield from the paths of explanation might be respected, there arose the notion of the 'exceptional normal',<sup>3</sup> which is so admirably illustrated by the Italian school of *microstoria*. Parallel with this development came the rise of 'case-studies', under the growing influence of anthropology and its particular ability to let the detail speak.

To provide a fuller account of the many and various inflexions of history would obviously require a much more detailed explanation; at the present time there seems to be a certain weariness with detail, perhaps from fear of losing the thread of the great historical adventure as a result of the tenacious pursuit of it or of losing sight of the solid bones of a past which must be retained at all costs, lest by some misfortune the future should slip through one's fingers (which would be quite unreasonable).

There is, therefore, a steady if barely perceptible return to what one might call more structured horizons, where once again the important task is the creation of grand theses and syntheses and the attribution of global explanations to a past which one would dearly love to see firmly within the grasp of one's senses. It is as though one needed to rediscover some previous history of ideas with a reassuring profile but with its features all fresh and rejuvenated thanks to all the recent 'minimal' and 'minuscule' work that has been carried out. And thus those sites which had barely been opened up a few years ago are being closed, and rumour has it that history is elsewhere and that work on them is no longer fashionable.

In the course of these developments, however, two questions concerning the connections with the archives remain unanswered.

First, does the seductive influence of the archives risk falsifying or distorting the object being studied; and might not the emotional and aesthetic link with these once buried words be itself a handicap or a rejection of reality, or prove too facile and ambiguous a means of entering into a discourse with history?

Second, is there a tendency to attribute overmuch meaning to these archives, emerging as they do from silence; and rather than a reflection of the real, might they not in fact be the oasis for satisfying our own thirst to see the poor and wretched spring to life? And might not one particular or exceptional document risk ruining the source work by earning the label of *misérabilisme*?

I have been in constant dialogue with these two questions (archives as seductress and archives as deceptive mirror of reality) for several years. I have chosen to work only from judicial archives, and my reading of popular Parisian society in the eighteenth century is based on these. The archives are the motivation for my practice and work as a historian. They are the grain which I sift for form and meaning. It is through them that I have met Robert Mandrou, Philippe Ariès and Michel Foucault, and it is thanks to them that I can today attempt a reply to the two questions formulated above.<sup>4</sup>

In the discipline of history, anything in the way of feeling or emotion is suspect; and in all fairness it is a mistrust that is well founded, for to it we owe the avoidance of many a deadend, particularly when identification and personal projection lead to embarrassing anachronisms.

Yet it is impossible to avoid entering the realm of aesthetics and emotion, given the kind of documents which have been discovered. The fine sand of history is made up of poor and lowly lives, impoverished and tragic existences, and of mean, contemptible and lacklustre personalities; they constitute its fragile yet essential thread. Surfacing as they do from oblivion, they remain at a distance from literature because they are stuck awkwardly in the cramped forms of the judicial apparatus. They are fragmentary lives because they were broken, or quite simply interrupted one day under interrogation. Coming into contact with them arouses emotion although it is not quite clear why. Perhaps it is because they failed in this way that these lives give the impression of possibilities or perhaps it is because they are so strange and distant that they can seem so close.

Emotion. The word is out! It is a word which is almost taboo for anyone who professes to be a student of social matters. But as I understand it, emotion is not, as is commonly believed, an exclusion of reason nor a kind of sugary sentimentality to be used for coating over whatever

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sections of reality it encounters with a uniform gloss. On the contrary it is one of the main supports for the process of research and understanding; and it is through the breach opened up between oneself and the object under consideration that enquiry enters in. Emotion does not necessarily engender contemplation nor oblation; it is also the ardour and assiduity required for understanding the violence and weakness of things and the mediocrity and extraordinariness of situations; it is also an encounter with the unfamiliar as well as a means of allowing oneself to be affected by what one already knew.

Thus if we can agree that emotion requires our acknowledgement (itself an achievement) then the emotional and the aesthetic can be seen differently, and are no longer what historians, quite rightly, prefer they should *not* be. For emotion is not fusion between oneself and the archives or the annihilation of all capacity to think in concrete terms, but rather the development of a reciprocity with the object, by which access is given to meaning. Emotion opens up into an attitude which is proactive rather than passive, allowing one to lay hold of the written word in order to take it, not as the result of research, but as a means of apprehending social life and thought. It can project the receptive person beyond his or her own preferences and ideologies, received thinking and stereotypes, and its surprises can be disturbing (surprise or fright, disgust or fear always take one outside oneself). We might find some of our usual habits coming unstuck as we encounter some of the rather strange characters reconstituted from the archives. The emotions which arise from such discoveries might lead us along uncertain paths which call on an unknown part of ourselves, which is a far cry from the 'mollification' which is so often described and decried. Emotion is, in fact, animating!

The archives are not precise, in the sense that one would understand the science of mathematics, for example; nor do they reveal the secret source where the organization of the truth might reside. Nor are they any more attractive for being tragic (evoking as they do, those chaotic lives in which frenzy, wickedness and cunning combine with the pitiful, to reveal more often than not, incompetence, insignificance and petty malice rather than solemn heroism). There is nothing sublime about the archives, or if there is, then it is only in the sense that each one of us is no more nor less sublime (no more than Christine V and no less than Cartouche).

Putting on stage a few poor bit players might upset some of our emotions; for it means dwelling a while on what is small or modest, imperfect or vile, in order to consider its meaning and make sense of it.

Nor does the meaning deliver itself up immediately. The judicial archives, for example, are entirely bound up within the judicial and police systems of the eighteenth century which produced and managed them. What they put on view results from their origins and they exist only



because a certain exercise of power brought them into being. They thus allow us to see the manner in which personal and collective behaviour overlapped and interlocked for better or for worse in the very conditions formulated by the authorities themselves. They are not 'reality', but at every step of the way, they demonstrate a particular type of adjustment to certain forms of coercion or to norms which were either imposed or internalized. This adjustment, consisting of words, deeds and cries of hope or defiance, is the motive force of historical reflection and the instrument for considering the period and its social groups. This obligatory coexistence between the State and private lives conceals shattered figures whose outlines we may be able to perceive.

In fact, one may go even further: a single isolated document from the archives has all the beauty of rarity – so rare in fact that there is a tendency to attribute overmuch meaning to it. But it is not, in fact, *the* word of the people nor of the poor. It defies and flies in the face of scholarly argument and discourse and, should one read it thoroughly, it shatters received opinion. Here, in support of my case, I take up once again one of the approaches of J. Rancière in his book *La Nuit des prolétaires* which sees more 'sophistication' in the archives than is customarily admitted.

The argument is that what is portrayed in the archives is in itself evidence of an entrenched 'need for the real'; (and there is certainly no shortage of concerned prose on the subject offering us a picture of popular misery and naivety which in itself contains traces of an imaginary or perceived landscape and thus a rejection of the everyday). These traces are worth pursuing and considering if we ourselves are to avoid becoming stuck in well-worn paths or predetermined schemas.

It is possible that the archives may be a rejection of the meaning we seek to attribute in advance to events and a shift away from any attempts at global theorizing. For me, they are the emergence of existences which offer our knowledge an extra bonus in as much as one is prepared to admit the possibility of transforming the accepted rules of social evolution. The archives are always explosive, and their meaning is never grasped once and for all. In this case, they are neither faithful to reality nor totally representative of it; but they play their part in this reality, offering differences and alternatives to other possible statements. They are not the truth but the beginnings of a truth and an eruption of meaning maintaining the greatest possible number of connections with reality. The archives present the exceptional and never the normal; in an excess of normality or lack of it we may discover bits of reality which otherwise might be lost to us in the overworked terrain of our knowledge.

I also like to think of the archives as an eruption; because eruption suggests an attack, an incursion, or a sudden and unexpected entry or invasion; for it is in this way that the archives come into their own. They

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burst bounds, break out, overflow. They are caprice, whim, tragedy – neither endorsing nor affirming. They neither summarize nor smoothe over conflict or tension. They ruffle the feathers of the real with their inopportune sorties and sallies. From this the historian must tease both sense and nonsense and, from all these loose ends, contradictions and observations, knit together a text – a rugged text – in which each incident is presented in its own terms.

In my study of popular Parisian behaviour in the eighteenth century, I am reconstituting shapes and forms and sketching outlines from minute accounts or forgotten conflicts. I am putting on view pictures from the past not for the love of drawing (or the picture itself) nor for the sake of the description, but because it is through these that one is able to follow men and women as they grapple with the whole of the social scene. We see them face to face with each other – choosing or encountering one another; meeting and parting; living with their children and their neighbourhood. And then, faced with work in the workshop or factory, we see them forming themselves into associations in order to improve their lot or finding themselves controlled and dominated by the utopian thinking of the authorities and the police, who were themselves also known to entertain conflicting dreams and aspirations in which individuality and awareness of self played their part. And finally, we see them in the face of collective events – the street spectacles and displays of power by the authorities of either a festive or a repressive nature, revealing beneath their apparent impulsiveness and impetuosity, the rules of their rationality or modes of thought.

From these sketches there emerges a picture of precariousness and strength along with a determination not to allow oneself to be abused or sold short. In Paris everything lived, moved and died in endless succession before the eyes of everyone else in an open space where one's neighbour, whether friend or foe, was the permanent witness to oneself. Emerging from the physical promiscuity, the inevitable sharing of fear and want, the difficult separation between public and private life, there is a profile of men and women stubbornly pursuing their way.

In these fragments clipped from their lives, disruption scarcely conceals their wrath and determination; and behind the written words – sometimes false, unjust or outrageous – there are traces of decisive encounters: those between men and women according to the roles assigned them by their sex; those made to accommodate the social and economic conditions imposed on them; and those gatherings together as a crowd, when in their own way they sought the greatest possible proximity with the justice of things.

It is of these encounters that I have attempted a considered account.

# Part I

## Feelings and Metamorphoses

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# 1

## Space and Ways of Life

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The apartment building in the *Quinze-Vingts* market, parish of Saint-Roch, looks like every other apartment building in Paris – a profusion of shops and workrooms intersected by passages and alley-ways and packed to the roof with lodgings and dormitories.<sup>1</sup> Laying bare its secret places and displaying its wounds, it offers scant refuge but none the less affords some sleep and rest of a kind, albeit without comfort and with practically no privacy.<sup>2</sup>

This damp anthill of a place is populated from top to bottom, not even the smallest space remaining unused. On the ground floor Widow Cochard has a struggle to keep her cod dry on account of the water dripping down the walls; but this has allowed the old Rambure woman to set up trade in herbs and chicory. What surplus there is can be sold each morning on the market square; and in the butcher's shop the stalls hardly leave enough room for the boys and journeymen who sleep on the wooden trestles once their day's work is over.

In the back room of a poultry shop overlooking the courtyard, there are turkeys roasting until dawn, ready for sale the next morning; and through the open windows of the carpenter's workshop come the sounds of the master joiner encouraging his two apprentices to get on with their planing instead of waving to customers and calling to the lads across the way. The flat above them belongs to Mme Simonne. She sells cooked meats made from scraps left over from the plates of the rich which she keeps in huge earthenware bowls prior to selling them off on her market stall. This she guards jealously, as it is in such an enviable position; she has even been known to resort to blows to defend it from street sellers who had risen early and beaten her to it.

Her bedroom door opens onto the unlit hovel which is the home of a coachman and his wife, a washerwoman. There are a lot of washerwomen

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living in this building, where the smell of dirty washing is barely distinguishable from the river water brought up from the Seine each morning by watercarriers, who keep the butts on each floor well filled. Through two half-open doors, trails of washing ignore the damp and steal onto the landing in a bid to get dry. Down below in the passageway, next to the herbalist, bundles of linen await delivery that same evening. Windows steam up, the stairs are slippery and the damp gets into everything. On the landing, the aroma of roast turkey mingles with the stench of filthy water, if not with the more pungent reek of dried cod.

On the quarry balcony – a type of verandah running around the inner courtyard of the building<sup>3</sup> – three little boys play quoits in between errands for their parents. They hardly notice one of the herb-grower's servants pestering a little girl who has come up to the pinmaker's on the third floor to collect her supply of pins for sale in the street.<sup>4</sup> Noise! Noise everywhere – and eyes – following you from window to door, landing to passageway. The dressmaker from the fourth floor decides to take advantage of the better light in the courtyard and do some finishing-off on the pavement. The journeymen joiners give her the usual chat but she's neither young nor old enough to mind.

Suddenly, everything stops. Between door and landing of the third floor an argument breaks out involving the seamstress and the men billeted beneath the roof. It's the fourth time in two days that they've bawled insults and abuse at one another.<sup>5</sup> Three gent's handkerchieves have apparently gone missing and the seamstress seems in a peculiar hurry to embroider some rather similar-looking items. Sitting in front of her door, she discreetly smuggles the linen between her legs and gathers it up under her apron. Her neighbour from the room opposite comes to her rescue; she is a fishwife, hot-tempered and loud-mouthed.

Everyone has stopped work. Axes stand ready, needles poised mid-air, wash dollies in hand. Everyone is waiting to see what will happen. The racket grows louder – the joiner's wife dashes upstairs four at a time, hurriedly unfastening her apron, which she brandishes at the men. They can't make out whether she is angry or joking, which annoys them even more. The youngest one grabs hold of the seamstress by her lawn bonnet. She loses her balance, trips on the stairs and falls flat in the middle of the children's game. Then all at once, for whatever reason – fear of going too far, or having to summon help yet again, or of being hauled up once more before the police commissioner whose premises are close by,<sup>6</sup> everything calms down. Everyone carries on as before, coming and going as normal. It was just another one of those unfortunate incidents.

The evening is drawing in now and is only likely to be disturbed by the nightly flight of young Gervais, a slender young lad of 11, employed in the master locksmith's shop nearby. Every single night the locksmith's wife



and the most senior journeyman chase after him to get him to clear up the workshop, and every single night he clears off, as crafty as a cat, cutting across lodgings and passageways in one bound, knowing the building inside out, as he does. He finally comes to a halt at the top of the loft, where he presses his nose to the window and pronounces on all and sundry, lord of all he surveys.

Dark silhouettes and everyday scenes. The customary restless activity of a building which combined within its walls the hours of work and time at home, daily contact and petty squabbles, chit-chat and callousness. What it amounted to was having to live in full view of someone else's gaze, that ever-present visitor whose intervention shaped lives and transformed them. One life interfered with another, and at times the two became merged. The apartment building was a living person and, along with all the others, it made up the district.

There were 20 districts in Paris and 48 commissioners to keep an eye on them, closely monitored and under the strict supervision of the Lieutenant-General of Police. They were all different and, as Lenoir wrote in his *'Mémoires'*: 'In each part of this city, there was a marked difference in the customs and way of life.'<sup>7</sup> Each district afforded an informed dialogue with the police and provided an invaluable frame of reference for its inhabitants.

The police commissioner, who was regularly in receipt of complaints, advice, letters and requests, tested its pulse from day to day, and as agent of calm, moderation, provocation and consolidation, he lived within the rhythm of its minor hiccups or its serious traumas. It was his job to keep it informed, running smoothly and in decent shape. He talked and wrote about it as he would a person, and whenever the Lieutenant of Police consulted him on a serious matter affecting the district, he used a vocabulary which could equally well have applied to a harmless, yet uncontrollable animal. The commissioner's infinite capacity to 'hear' the district was, without doubt, an altogether indispensable yardstick for the Lieutenant-General of Police.

The district was a well-defined territory in which everyone found his or her place in relation to a neighbour or to someone else – someone in such and such a trade, for instance, or serving in this or that shop, or standing anxiously at a certain place in the main concourse to be sure of keeping a 'business' pitch which was, in effect, a livelihood. The channels of information traceable from housemaid to journeyman, from servant to street seller, were fluid and imprecise – having all the hallmarks, in a word, of hearsay.

As well as an area, the district was a sounding board, a kind of living entity reacting to events and to the good and bad fortune of its people, a

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background presence throughout testimonies and interrogations. It was always a good sign to be known in one's area, but on the other hand it did no good to be seen as a bit of an oddity or a layabout, and worse still, to upset the community. It received both people and their situations, weighed up reputations and transmitted them. It was the director of a complicated game with serious consequences for those who lost their way. An actor of exemplary ability, it was at once faceless and multiform, and while lacking any consistency other than geographic, it nevertheless extended its influence daily. It held no civil or judicial authority, yet at the same time possessed both. It was also an impressive transmitter, imparting its wisdom at the point between action and assimilation – incidents later diagnosed by the police and the State as feverish or mad, docile or passive, innocent or loyal.

Nothing of what happened here was insignificant, either for the police or for its inhabitants. If we take a closer look at some of these incidents we shall hopefully gain a better understanding of the position it held, and of the methods used to interpret and ultimately contain it.

All the basic aspects of life were under police supervision. Traffic and commerce, amongst other things, had to flow freely, the collection of refuse needed monitoring, and the rules applying to *cabarets*<sup>8</sup> and proprietors of furnished lettings had to be respected. The list was obviously endless, but the chief fear of the Lieutenant-General of Police never varied: should he do his utmost (or do nothing) to prevent the spread of rumours in the various districts?

The whole subject of 'weight', for instance, was a notorious sore point which could quite often lead to litigation, as it was here that fraud, trafficking and injustice kept constant company, bringing in their wake the wrath of the public who were naturally concerned about their food supplies.<sup>9</sup>

In 1766 the Lieutenant-General of Police, Sartine, wrote hastily to his commissioners that there had been a wave of public discontent over meat which had been badly bled, as well as inaccurate measures and the resulting unfair prices. He wrote:

On my instructions police inspectors are to monitor the purveyance of meat in their districts. However, this precautionary measure is not sufficient in itself, and I would be most obliged to Your Good Selves if you could occasionally look into the matter by checking with your police courts that weights and measures are accurate and that there are no monopolies which I ought to clamp down on.<sup>10</sup>

But in spite of these precautions the price of meat continued to rise at an alarming rate and two years later complaints were clearly audible. This

time Sartine wanted everything under control, not just the complaints, but also the comments on everyone's lips which were lending a worrying tone to the district. He exclaims:

The price of meat is going up and they have the audacity to inform the public that it is with my approval. As this is most certainly not the case, I would be most grateful if you would keep me informed of any complaints which might be referred to you concerning this matter of price rises as well as any mistaken assumptions held by the butchers, their stallholders or their errand boys.<sup>11</sup>

The hunt for loose talk, comment and rumour was one of the essential preoccupations of the government of the capital. The attachment of so much importance to this activity, as in the planting of *mouches*<sup>12</sup> and official observers whose job it was to 'seize' anything said in public places,<sup>13</sup> shows well enough how useful a tool the spoken word was for the police. It was in fact a tide to be harnessed and stemmed. Such an attitude to what one might call gossip is hardly surprising when one considers that its importance in the eyes of those responsible for its circulation was enhanced in proportion to the vigour of the police in pursuing it. This interaction resulted in a never-ending game of elaboration and embellishment between the 'talking' public on the one hand, whose verbal communication was considered a highly prized instrument, and the police on the other hand, whose responsibility it was to gather the gossip, *the more effectively to contain it*. Neighbourhood gossip was not just a product of the district, it was also the fruit of whatever the circumstances, the inhabitants or the police chose to make it. It was a sophisticated product which cannot be attributed entirely to the people, as though they alone were responsible for secreting, nurturing and manipulating it, for by gathering the gossip, the police were actively involved in its generation, a parameter well worth remembering.

This constant ebb and flow of words affected everyone in the neighbourhood but they knew how to deal with it. There was nothing more powerful, for instance, than those exchanges of words between neighbours, which could sometimes be taken as veritable declarations of war, and where even a loose word might result in an arrest or a summons to appear before the commissioner.

Martin Triollet (a humorous man as his cross-examination indicates), knew this only too well. In 1750 he was accused of saying to a neighbour who was out of work and bemoaning his lot, 'Go and beat up the Provost or, better still, grab hold of some children. You should be able to make a living then.' He was referring to the abduction of children in the very middle of Paris. He chose his words badly, however, and was immediately