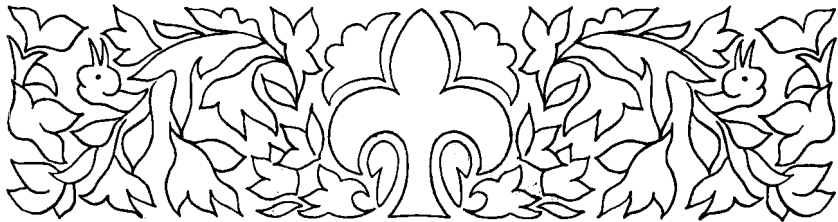


# The Great Cat Massacre

ROBERT  
DARNTON

THE GREAT  
CAT MASSACRE  
AND OTHER EPISODES  
IN FRENCH  
CULTURAL HISTORY



Robert Darnton

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The Great Cat Massacre  
And Other Episodes in  
French Cultural History

for Nicholas

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# The Great Cat Massacre

## And Other Episodes in French Cultural History



# INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK investigates ways of thinking in eighteenth-century France. It attempts to show not merely what people thought but how they thought—how they construed the world, invested it with meaning, and infused it with emotion. Instead of following the high road of intellectual history, the inquiry leads into the unmapped territory known in France as *l'histoire des mentalités*. This genre has not yet received a name in English, but it might simply be called cultural history; for it treats our own civilization in the same way that anthropologists study alien cultures. It is history in the ethnographic grain.

Most people tend to think that cultural history concerns high culture, culture with a capital *c*. The history of culture in the lower case goes back as far as Burckhardt, if not Herodotus; but it is still unfamiliar and full of surprises. So the reader may want a word of explanation. Where the historian of ideas traces the filiation of formal thought from philosopher to philosopher, the ethnographic historian studies the way ordinary people made sense of the world. He attempts to uncover their cosmology, to show how they organized reality in their minds and expressed it in their behavior. He does not try to make a philosopher out of the man in the street but

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to see how street life called for a strategy. Operating at ground level, ordinary people learn to be “street smart”—and they can be as intelligent in their fashion as philosophers. But instead of deriving logical propositions, they think with things, or with anything else that their culture makes available to them, such as stories or ceremonies.

What things are good to think with? Claude Lévi-Strauss applied that question to the totems and tatoos of Amazonia twenty-five years ago. Why not try it out on eighteenth-century France? Because eighteenth-century Frenchmen cannot be interviewed, the skeptic will reply; and to drive the point home, he will add that archives can never serve as a substitute for field work. True, but the archives from the Old Regime are exceptionally rich, and one can always put new questions to old material. Furthermore, one should not imagine that the anthropologist has an easy time with his native informant. He, too, runs into areas of opacity and silence, and he must interpret the native’s interpretation of what the other natives think. Mental undergrowth can be as impenetrable in the bush as in the library.

But one thing seems clear to everyone who returns from field work: other people are other. They do not think the way we do. And if we want to understand their way of thinking, we should set out with the idea of capturing otherness. Translated into the terms of the historian’s craft, that may merely sound like the familiar injunction against anachronism. It is worth repeating, nonetheless; for nothing is easier than to slip into the comfortable assumption that Europeans thought and felt two centuries ago just as we do today—allowing for the wigs and wooden shoes. We constantly need to be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past, to be administered doses of culture shock.

There is no better way, I believe, than to wander through the archives. One can hardly read a letter from the Old Regime without coming up against surprises—anything from the constant dread of toothaches, which existed everywhere, to the obsession with braiding dung for display on manure heaps, which remained confined to certain villages. What was proverbial wisdom to our ancestors is completely opaque to us. Open any eighteenth-century book of proverbs, and you will find entries such as: “He who is

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snotty, let him blow his nose.” When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning. The thread might even lead into a strange and wonderful world view.

This book attempts to explore such unfamiliar views of the world. It proceeds by following up the surprises provided by an unlikely assortment of texts: a primitive version of “Little Red Riding Hood,” an account of a massacre of cats, a bizarre description of a city, a curious file kept by a police inspector—documents that cannot be taken to typify eighteenth-century thought but that provide ways of entering into it. The discussion begins with the most vague and general expressions of world view and becomes increasingly precise. Chapter 1 provides an exegesis of the folklore that was familiar to nearly everyone in France but was especially pertinent to the peasantry. Chapter 2 interprets the lore of a group of urban artisans. Moving up the social scale, chapter 3 shows what urban life meant to a provincial bourgeois. The scene then shifts to Paris and the world of the intellectuals—first as it was seen by the police, who had their own way of framing reality (chapter 4), then as it was sorted out epistemologically in the key text of the Enlightenment, the *Discours préliminaire* of the *Encyclopédie* (chapter 5). The last chapter then shows how Rousseau’s break with the Encyclopedists opened up a new way of thinking and feeling, one that can be appreciated by rereading Rousseau from the perspective of his readers.

The notion of reading runs through all the chapters, for one can read a ritual or a city just as one can read a folktale or a philosophic text. The mode of exegesis may vary, but in each case one reads for meaning—the meaning inscribed by contemporaries in whatever survives of their vision of the world. I have therefore tried to read my way through the eighteenth century, and I have appended texts to my interpretations so that my own reader can interpret these texts and disagree with me. I do not expect to have the last word and do not pretend to completeness. This book does not provide an inventory of ideas and attitudes in all the social groups and geographical regions of the Old Regime. Nor does it offer typical case studies, for I do not believe there is such a thing as a typical peasant

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or a representative bourgeois. Instead of chasing after them, I have pursued what seemed to be the richest run of documents, following leads wherever they went and quickening my pace as soon as I stumbled on a surprise. Straying from the beaten path may not be much of a methodology, but it creates the possibility of enjoying some unusual views, and they can be the most revealing. I do not see why cultural history should avoid the eccentric or embrace the average, for one cannot calculate the mean of meanings or reduce symbols to their lowest common denominator.

This confession of nonsystematism does not imply that anything goes in cultural history because anything can pass as anthropology. The anthropological mode of history has a rigor of its own, even if it may look suspiciously like literature to a hard-boiled social scientist. It begins from the premise that individual expression takes place within a general idiom, that we learn to classify sensations and make sense of things by thinking within a framework provided by our culture. It therefore should be possible for the historian to discover the social dimension of thought and to tease meaning from documents by relating them to the surrounding world of significance, passing from text to context and back again until he has cleared a way through a foreign mental world.

This kind of cultural history belongs to the interpretive sciences. It may seem too literary to be classified under the *appellation contrôlée* of "science" in the English-speaking world, but it fits in nicely with the *sciences humaines* in France. It is not an easy genre, and it is bound to be imperfect, but it should not be impossible, even in English. All of us, French and "Anglo-Saxons," pedants as well as peasants, operate within cultural constraints, just as we all share conventions of speech. So historians should be able to see how cultures shape ways of thinking, even for the greatest thinkers. A poet or philosopher may push a language to its limits, but at some point he will hit against the outer frame of meaning. Beyond it, madness lies—the fate of Hölderlin and Nietzsche. But within it, great men can test and shift the boundaries of meaning. Thus there should be room for Diderot and Rousseau in a book about *mentalités* in eighteenth-century France. By including them along with the peasant tellers of tales and the plebeian killers of cats, I have abandoned the usual distinction between elite and popular culture, and



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have tried to show how intellectuals and common people coped with the same sort of problems.

I realize there are risks in departing from the established modes of history. Some will object that the evidence is too vague for one ever to penetrate into the minds of peasants who disappeared two centuries ago. Others will take offense at the idea of interpreting a massacre of cats in the same vein as the *Discours préliminaire* of the *Encyclopédie*, or interpreting it at all. And still more readers will recoil at the arbitrariness of selecting a few strange documents as points of entry into eighteenth-century thought rather than proceeding in a systematic manner through the canon of classic texts. I think there are valid replies to those objections, but I do not want to turn this introduction into a discourse on method. Instead, I would like to invite the reader into my own text. He may not be convinced, but I hope he will enjoy the journey.