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## **Between History and Anthropology: A Review of The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History by Robert Darnton**

This article-review examines some important aspects of Historical Anthropology on the basis of Robert Darnton's book *The Great Cat Massacre*. We believe that Historical Anthropology is a useful instrument in learning and understanding various social and cultural processes. In this case, Darnton's work represents a good example of such work. In order to understand the culture and mentality of French people from the eighteenth century, Darnton analysed different sources such as folktales, personal letters, diaries, and policeman's reports. This article discloses methods of understanding history via anthropology and vice versa. It can be a useful source for both historians and social anthropologists.

*Keywords:* historical anthropology, folklore studies, cultural history, French history.

### *Introduction*

Historical anthropology is a combination of synchronic and diachronic approaches. It is a good premise of approaches for anthropological questions. Historical Anthropology is directly related to French, Italian, and English scholars who at one time became disappointed with the traditional methods of history used in explaining medieval Europe, focusing on the history of constitutions, political institutions, elites, diplomacy, religion, and classes. These historians adopted concepts from sociocultural anthropology, political anthropology and folklore studies for better understanding and illustrating the historical processes where the life of medieval communes, economics, culture were intertwined. As a result, the scholars such as Marc Block and Jacques le Goff, Jean-Claude Schmitt, Pierre Nora and Carlo Ginsburg had a great success in reforming science of history, they set trends such as Cultural History, History of Mentality and Microhistory [1]. On one hand, Macfarlane [2] stated how some anthropological concepts positively contributed to the studies in history. It includes applying methods of holistic approach and *native's point of view* coined by Malinowski while analysing the written historical documents. On the other hand, Mintz (1985) underlined the power of history in explaining human nature. He argued that social phenomena by their nature are historical, therefore can never be separated from their past and future context. Lindner's *Nomads and Ottomans from Medieval Anatolia*, Barth's *Nomads of South Persia*, Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* represent some good examples of historical anthropology. For instance, Lindner and Barth focused on nomadic societies. It should be noted that to write about history of nomads is extremely difficult, because these communities are in constant move. The sources about them appear here and there in pieces, thus historian should mainly rely on oral sources in reconstructing the past of nomads [3;4]. Schorkowitz (2019) believes that historical anthropology is not a separate field in social anthropology it is rather a prism that provides opportunity for wide-range of combined researches in two disciplines (history and anthropology). In his opinion, historical anthropology is a method of using applied historical thinking in anthropology for deeper understanding the processes, structures and transformation of social organisations and cultural identities.

Based on the arguments above, we believe that history and anthropology should always nurture each other in a positive manner. In this article, we attempt to explain the concepts and methods of historical anthropology reviewing the book *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* written by American cultural historian, Robert Darnton. Overall, the book consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 provides detailed overview of French folk tales and their interpretation as a product of peasantry. In this chapter he argues that folktales can be a reliable source in reconstructing the peasants' life and world view from the Old Regime. Chapter 2 interprets the folklore of urban artisans. The lore of urban artisans was interpreted as a passive rebellion against the shop masters where they were working. Chapter 3 demonstrates through the

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eyes of a provincial bourgeois, who took meticulous notes about city life. In Chapter 4, we came across with the police, who investigated the world of intellectuals from Paris. Finally, the last two chapters of the book were in a way similar to each other. They both deal with the problem of epistemology and readers' acceptance, and critiques of intellectuals' works. As a sample for analytical discussion, Darnton chose the works of Diderot and Rousseau. In order to understand the writer's interpretations in these chapters, one should have a knowledge of philosophy and mainstream philosophical schools in general.

### *Experimental*

Firstly, the authors of this review did intensive reading of the book *The Great Cat Massacre* and took necessary notes. Secondly, the basic points from the book were summarized by the authors and presented in the PPT format in one of the historical anthropology classes conducted at the Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Letters, Hacettepe University. This oral presentation stimulated a group discussion of PhD students about the potential of innovative research methods used by Darnton in addressing the historical problems. Finally, the authors' personal notes shared during the group discussion laid out the foundation for this article.

### *Results and Discussion*

Darnton defined his work in French as *l'histoire des mentalites* whereas in English, as its counterpart, he used the term "Cultural History". Thus, Darnton believed that the way of thinking or mentality was itself a culture. There are two main questions that Darnton attempts to address in his book. They are "what did people think?" and "how did people think in eighteenth-century of France?". Since the establishment of Anthropology as a discipline there was a great tendency among anthropologists to research on the *Other* (we think this is the trend even today, most of the anthropological works are focused on the marginal societies: e.g. ethnic minorities, sub-cultures, criminal elements etc.). In fact, cultural or social anthropology began with studying non-Western societies: peoples who are mainly labelled as "primitive" and so-called "unspoiled aborigines" (Mintz, 1985). Darnton similarly to mainstream anthropologists, positions the people from the past as Others, because he understands the importance of creating accurate historical picture. The accurate description will not be possible if historians, studying the past of their own societies, take for granted the characteristic features to their own societies. For those scholars, who were not able to realise this fact, Darnton urges to get rid of "false sense of familiarity with the past" (1999, p. 4). What was proverbial wisdom to our ancestors is completely *opaque* to us. By picking up 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 worldview* [5, 5].

Therefore, the purpose of this book was to explore unfamiliar views of the world. It is clear that France of that period of time comprised vast categories of people such as peasants, artisans, bourgeois, philosophers, and intellectuals, etc. The author dedicated specific chapters to each of these categories in order to reveal the specific aspects of their particular way of thinking. The book exceeds the boundary existing between the social classes and tries to show how intellectuals and common people coped with the same sort of problems.

#### ***Monsieur and Madame Ogre, Cinderella, Fairies and Many Others***

This part can be read with a great pleasure, as it provides an opportunity to revisit our childhood memories. In this chapter, the reader has to focus on the peasants who tell the tales rather than the tales themselves. The Peasants were illiterate. They rarely wrote about themselves or documented their lives like bourgeois people. Therefore, for historians, it is difficult to reconstruct peasants' past, because most of the written sources concerns the life of upper class. However, Darnton seems to find a way. He analysed folklore in order to give us the information about eighteenth-century French peasant mentality. In this chapter, Darnton argues that *folk tales* are *historical documents*, and investigating them would shed light to many obscure pages of French peasants' history. In fact, folk tales represent unique genre which could be the source not only for the history but also for many other social disciplines. They evolved over many centuries and, have different forms in different cultural traditions. Consequently, the historical importance of folktales should not be neglected even though they cannot be dated like other historical documents. They have the potential to provide an entry to the mental world of peasants under the Old Regime. Through the analysis of folktales, in this Chapter, Darnton revealed the problems which were common to French peasants' life in the eighteenth century. The peasants and their children mainly suffered from *malnutrition, poverty, demographic crisis, famine, illnesses*. All these problems were reflected in the content of their tales too.

#### ***Katzenmusik or Faire le chat***

In Chapter 2, the folklore of urban artisans is interpreted. In reconstructing artisans' life, Darnton mainly relied on the account of Nicolas Contat, a worker from a printing shop. While analysing Contat's account, Darnton especially focuses on the one specific event that involved workers from a small printing shop located in Rue Severin, Paris. In this event, not only the workers but also *cats* played an important role. The workers were not treated well by their masters. They starved most of the time. In contrast, the masters' cats were well-fed than the workers. This situation made the workers angry and nudged them to create a plan of vengeance upon their master and mistress. Unfortunately, in realisation of their cruel plan, innocent cats had to suffer. One of the shop workers, who had an extraordinary talent for mimicry, crawled up on the roof during one night and was meowing horribly, so master and his wife could not sleep. This act lasted several nights, so master and his wife finally decided to get rid of their cats. The shop workers were told to fulfil their master's order. The workers showed extreme cruelty whilst killing the cats. First, they staged a mock trial of cats, and after pronouncing them guilty, they hang poor animals. Further, workers were constantly reenacting this occasion among themselves in order to have fun through copie(parody) and pantomime. The death of cats provided workers with laughter and satisfaction. Apart from Contat's account, Darnton uses wide variety of materials in order to reveal attitude of eighteenth-century Europeans towards the cats. In the historical description of ceremonial cycles and carnivals it is possible to trace the constant presence of cats. "Cats played an important role in some charivaris. In Burgundy, the crowd incorporated cat torture into its rough music. While mocking a cuckold or some other victim, the youths passed around a cat, tearing its fur to make it howl. During the summer solstice Parisians liked incinerate cats while the Courimauds (cat chasers) of Saint Chamond preferred to chase a flaming cat through the streets [5, 83]."

The author concludes that ambiguous ontological character of cats, their mystic aura and similarity with human beings made them to be chosen as the most suitable animal for staging ceremonies. Looking at the cat massacre from Contat's account, we can state that the cats fell victims to the *class struggle*. In this part, it is important to highlight how Darnton uses the concept of *native's point of view* familiar from anthropology. Although killing the cats is a violent act, the author does not rush to condemn or judge the artisans for their actions, instead he explains the reason behind this massacre. To do so, firstly, he distances himself from the subjects of his research that is acting as if they are completely unknown to him. Secondly, Darnton prioritises the artisans' rationale of killing the cats that is poverty, hunger and powerlessness.

### ***Bourgeois, Policeman and Intellectual***

In Chapter 3, Darnton investigates the eighteenth-century bourgeois through the document called *Etat et description de la ville de Montpellier fait en 1768*. The description was written by anonymous middle-class citizen from Montpellier. His description was similar to Contat's account of the cat massacre. According to Darnton, it is possible to find many written sources about the life of middle-class citizens from eighteenth-century, however, this manuscript stands out in a way how its author attempted to give a complete picture of the city Montpellier. His obsession with details made every chapel, every wig maker and every stray dog in the city subject to his 426 pages manuscript. What can we learn about the way of thinking bourgeois through this document?

Bourgeois used to be economically strong but politically weak social class in France. Therefore, they were the leaders of French Revolution. Although the Description did not contain formal definition of the word *bourgeois*, Darnton was able to draw a conclusion about particular characteristics of this social type. "The "bourgeois" pure and simple: that is, a man who lived from land rents and annuities without exercising any profession" [5, 126]. The author of the Description was also exceptional in a way that it gives us the most detailed catalogue of local specialities some of which do not exist anymore: "...- glove makers, perfumers, traders in verdigris — and working through the types that proliferated everywhere in early modern cities: cobblers, pewterers, tailors, saddlers, locksmiths, goldsmiths, glaziers, braziers, wig makers, rope makers. The list stretched into hundreds of workshops and lost itself in untranslatable trades — the mangonniers, romainiers, passementiers, palemardiens, plumassiers, and panguestiers [5,126]."

While in Chapter 3 the bourgeois from Montpellier attempted to describe people like himself, in Chapter 4 Joseph D'Hemery, a police officer from Paris, was filing information about intellectuals. To build up the intellectuals' dossiers, D'Hemery used not only personal interrogations of his subjects but also other kind of sources such as journals, spies, concierges, cafe gossips, etc. In five years, between 1748 and 1753, he wrote five hundred reports. Among D'Hemery's subjects there were famous names such as Rousseau, Diderot and Montesquieu. This chapter demonstrates how historian can interpret the given historical material. For example, Darnton tried to generalise the information given by D'Hemery statistically. It gave him an idea about the age and profession of writers, their family status, as well as the role of women in the intellectual society.

Apart from that, Darnton gave us the idea about the personality of D'Hemery or how he thought as a policeman who inspected the book trade in XVIII century of France. Even though this period of time was entitled as Enlightenment by later historians, inspector D'Hemery at that time did not conceive it as such. He looked at individual cases and did not label the people from his reports as the representatives of "the intellectual tide" [5, 181]. D'Hemery did not foresee the French Revolution, but his reports allowed him to see how *the monarchy was becoming weak in public eyes*.

### ***The Works of Intellectuals***

In the Chapter 5, Darnton analyses how the problem of epistemology was addressed by the philosophers of XVIII century in France. He examines the *Encyclopedie* of Diderot and analyses his way of representing the knowledge. It was not by chance that Darnton chose this work for his analysis. In the eighteenth century, the publication of *Encyclopedie* made a great fuss among the intellectuals of that period of time. According to Darnton, Diderot's work stood out from other works, because it was not a usual dictionary where the "information arranged according to the innocent order of the alphabet" (1999: 194) instead it showed new approach in systematising the knowledge. The word *encyclopedia* means circle in Greek. Therefore, Encyclopedists could navigate and map the world of knowledge. The knowledge metaphorically represented the tree "which communicated the idea that it grew into organic whole, despite the diversity of its branches" [5, 194].

The last chapter discusses the readers' response to Rousseau's books. In fact, it is a detailed discussion of one reader's response rather than many readers. At the beginning of this chapter, Darnton goes back to his point of departure where he argued that we should admit the fact that when we investigate *the history of our society* we will confront alien mentality. For modern day, French people, their ancestors are the Others as much as the people from Bali or India for them. This fact should be evident in the way how we read because the people from eighteenth century did not read in the same way like we do nowadays. For Darnton, reading is not merely a skill like carpentry or embroidery; "it is a constant construction of meaning within a system of communication" [5; 216]. If we understand how the French read two hundred years ago, we will be able to understand how they thought at that period of time. In order to fulfil this task, this time Darnton examines the correspondence of someone called Jean Ranson with Societe Typographique de Neuchatel (STN), Swiss publishing house. Jean Ranson was a merchant from La Rochelle, who was fond of reading books, especially the ones written by Rousseau. Darnton analysed Ranson's forty-seven letters written to STN. Ranson's letters provided a rare view of a reader, discussing his reading while weaving his everyday affairs in the text of his letters.

Darnton, in this chapter, discussed Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise* and *Confessions*, their impact on the readers. In both novels, Rousseau's aim was to speak from his heart and in such way to reach his readers. He did not want to be novelesque instead he was trying to reach out the real life. His principles were to write the truth and establish direct contact with his readers. This led to the Rousseausim among the readers, through Ranson's letters it is obvious that he was fascinated with both writings and personality of Rousseau. For example, in his letters he mentioned that his wife was breast-feeding as it was recommended by Rousseau. Rousseausim penetrated into the everyday life of ordinary bourgeois and "helped him make sense of the things that mattered most in his existence: love, marriage, parenthood — the big events of a little life" [5, 242]. Ranson's letters was not the only source for Darnton in establishing the image of eighteenth-century Rousseau readers. He also gave the citations from other famous figures who shared their feeling after reading *La Nouvelle Heloise*. Some of these writings would be extremely funny to us, at least for us, regardless the deep respect which we nurture towards them. It made many of us smile imagining serious public figures such as the marquise de Polignac, army officer Louis Francois or Charlotte de La Taille, who were weeping almost throughout the whole six volumes while reading and got sick after the final pages of it. Thus, the sobbing was also the common response to the Rousseaus's books. This sort of reaction towards the books of epistolary genre is not common today. We expect to have violence, bloodshed, more sex scenes in our readings. Darnton's purpose was to show the difference between us and the readers of pre-Revolutionary France. Ranson and his contemporaries belonged to a peculiar species of reader, one that arose in the eighteenth century and that began to die out in the age of Madame Bovary. "The Rousseauistic readers of pre-Revolutionary France threw themselves into texts with a passion that we can barely imagine, that is as alien to us as the lust for plunder among the Norsemen...or the fear of demons among the Balinese" [5, 251]. As a result, Ranson's letters above all demonstrated how the quality of reading in the Old Regime changed owing to Rousseau.

### Conclusion

Darnton's research approach is unique because he brought together the different themes and categories of people in one book. As a historian, he focused on one specific period which is eighteenth-century France, while as an anthropologist he wrote about peoples of the Old Regime. Darnton valued the anthropological approach in addressing historical issues. The reason for this is that the native's point of view (advocated by anthropologists) essentially contributes to revealing the truth behind the events similar to Cat Massacre in Rue de Severin. For instance, the initial step towards understanding the eighteenth-century artisans' culture is to accept the slaughter of masters' cats as a joke ritual of artisans and as a form of their rebellion. Although conservative historians doubt the reliability of folktales and bourgeois letters in analysing French history, it is impossible to ignore these sources. This is because they essentially help learning mentality or in other words the culture of communities that no longer exist in France.

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А.Б. Рахимжанова, Э. Кючюкбэкир

### **Тарихи антропология: Роберт Дарнтонның «Мысықтардың ұлы қырғыны және француз мәдени тарихындағы тағы басқа эпизодтар» атты кітабына шолу**

Мақалада американдық тарихшы Роберт Дарнтонның «Мысықтардың ұлы қырғыны және француз мәдени тарихындағы тағы басқа эпизодтар» атты кітабына сүйене отырып, тарихи антропологияның маңызды аспектілеріне талдау жасалған. Атап айтсақ, тарихи антропология әр түрлі мәдени және әлеуметтік процестерді түсінуде және үйренуде пайдалы құрал болып табылады. Осы тұрғыдан бағамдаған кезде Дарнтонның кітабы жақсы бір зерттеу жұмысының үлгісі болып табылады. Дарнтон XVIII ғ. өмір сүрген француздардың мәдениеті мен менталитетін түсіну үшін халық ертегілеріне, жеке хаттарға, күнделіктерге және полиция есептеріне талдау жүргізген. Авторлар мақалада тарихты антропология арқылы зерттеудің мазмұнын ашуға тырысқан. Мақала материалдары тарихшылар мен әлеуметтік антропологтарға арналған пайдалы дереккөзі болып саналады.

*Кілт сөздер:* тарихи антропология, фольклористика, мәдениет тарихы, француз тарихы.

А. Рахимжанова, Э. Кючюкбэкир

### **Историческая антропология: обзор книги Роберта Дарнтонна «Большая кошачья резня и другие эпизоды французской истории культуры»**

В статье рассмотрены важные аспекты исторической антропологии на основе книги Роберта Дарнтонна «Большая кошачья резня и другие эпизоды французской истории культуры». Авторы считают, что историческая антропология — полезный инструмент в изучении и понимании различных социальных и культурных процессов. В данном случае книга Дарнтонна представляет собой хороший пример такой работы. Чтобы понять культуру и менталитет французов XVIII века, Дарнтон проанализировал различные источники, такие как народные сказки, личные письма, дневники и полицейские отчеты. В этом обзор раскрыты методы понимания истории через антропологию, материалы статьи являются полезным источником как для историков, так и для социальных антропологов.

*Ключевые слова:* историческая антропология, фольклористика, история культуры, история Франции.

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