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Microhistory demands a leap of faith. As readers we must believe that the historian's account of a single event represents a larger process, be it socioeconomic, cultural or political. In this week's readings, historians expose the mentalities of people who acted in peculiar, irrational ways. Though they examine unrelated issues, the general approaches of Robert Darnton and Philip Kuhn are similar. Unfortunately, I can't say the same for Clifford Geertz.

Above all, Darnton and Kuhn seek to understand the reasoning behind the actions of the French and the Chinese. Both at one point draw on folklore. They each pose two questions. For Darnton it is 1) Why cats? 2) Why was it so funny? Darnton then describes what life was like for French factory printers in Old Regime France. He notes how the "large printing houses, backed by government, eliminated most of the smaller shops, and an oligarchy of masters seized control of the industry." He uses STN wage books to show that printers' jobs were often temporary (79-80). In short, life was hard for the journeyman printers. In contrast, bourgeois masters lived comfortably. They owned pets, an indication that they belonged to a different 'subculture'(82).

Having established the social tension between the workers and the owners, Darnton can only explain why the underpaid printers would want to kill the master's cats when he goes beyond the call of a social historian and explores the cultural implications, the traditions and myths, which made cats the target. He links cats to witchcraft; killing them was a sign of bad luck; cats also symbolized the sexuality of women and the cuckolding of men (92-95). Yet the answer to his second question (why was this so funny) is even more insightful. Darnton makes an important point in the introduction: "our own inability to get the joke is an indication of the distance that separates us from the workers of preindustrial Europe" (78). Interestingly, his answer lies in the previous chapter on children's folktales. An underlying theme in French folktales was that, though life was "nasty, brutish, and short," (29), there were still ways to cope. Tricksterism did not provide a formula for overthrowing the harsh society, but was still the key to dealing with it (59). Thus, the massacre was so funny because the workers were made heroes; they had made numbskulls of their masters and got off scot-free.

My assessment of Darnton's approach: thought provoking—yes, wholly credible—I'm not so sure. A policeman, a second estate bourgeois, and a "typical merchant" guide the remainder of his discussions. Undoubtedly, his creativity ought to be commended, for he tackles big shifts in class identity and intellectual currents from a very limited base of information. Yet this may also be the reason I got the sense that he does not allow the sources to speak for themselves. Does he push his analyses too far on a shaky foundation of evidence? Take the quote on p.96: "Not only did the apprentices exploit their master's superstition in order to run not at his expense, but they also turned their rioting against their

mistress.” How can we know for sure? But Darnton’s point is just this: we can’t, but it’s still worth trying. I did appreciate his frankness at the end, when he admitted that his method “does not resolve the problem of proof,” nor does it deal address the “problem of representativeness” (259). Further, he exposes the downfalls the Annales historians, referring to their “overcommitment to the quantification of culture and the undervaluation of the symbolic element in social intercourse” (258). Perhaps Philip Kuhn is a bit more cautious in his analysis. For example, he refuses to state the connection between “social tension” and “sorcery fear,” however tempting the correlation (48). Rather, he undertakes two questions he thinks he can answer: 1) Why was the damage was so limited? 2) Why did the scare arise in the first place. One of Kuhn’s strengths is that he examines the mindsets of the imperial elite, bureaucrat and commoner separately. Like Darnton, the reader understands when and under which circumstances these individuals lived. He stresses that “panic factor,” dictated Manchu responses. Unlike the European witch hunts where trials were widely publicized, the soulstealing incidents were “not [even] whispered, not even mentioned in confidential court letters” (92). With regard to the second question, he rationalizes why monks and wandering beggars were targeted by all three social tiers. Kuhn too discusses themes in folklore. The belief that the bodily soul could be separated from the spiritual soul, for example, can be found in the fiction and the folklore that dates far back (95). In the end, Kuhn’s study makes the Chinese sorcery scare curious, even unfortunate, but not ridiculous.

When compared to Darnton and Kuhn, Geertz’s piece pales considerably. It isn’t good history: in fact, some quotes could be excerpts taken directly from a sub-par Bali travel guide. Note to tourist: “In Bali, to be teased is to be accepted” (416) “The Balinese never do anything in a simple way that they can contrive to do in a complicated one” (425). These are general references with no historical depth. He rarely mentions who these Balinese are, what they do for a living, what they worry about, etc. Moreover, in a rather condescending comment, he reveals his weak grasp on the region: “We were American professors; the government had cleared us; we were there to study culture; we were going to write a book to tell American’s about Bali” (415). Most interesting, then, is how he picks a cockfight to show the Americans how “The Balinese,” think and act. Whereas Darnton had urged the reader to understand French jokes, Geertz merely highlights differences between us and “The Balinese [who] see in fighting cocks—themselves, their social order, abstract hatred, masculinity, demonic power....” (442). Throughout the article, I waited to hear why this was so, and was disappointed.

Nevertheless, Geertz did make an interesting point about the culture of people as an “ensemble of texts” (452). The two historians would agree with Geertz in that “societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations” (453). This week’s reading alerted me to the obstacles facing cultural history as a field. But as Darnton argues, historians

can't only look in obvious places. Rather, they must look for the “opacity in the texts,” and accept that “world views are bound to be fuzzy around the edges” (262). With each new source new interpretations are bound to be created.