CHAPTER 5 THINKING IN TIME: CONTEXT

"Men resemble their times more than they do their fathers."

Arab Proverb

"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

L. P. Hartley

Historians are firm believers in the cliché that truth is stranger than fiction What could be stranger, for instance, than the episode recounted by Robert Darnton in his intriguing essay, "Workers Revolt· The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Severin."[1] The essay deals with a rather grisly episode in the Paris of the late 1730s—the attempt one day of a number of printer's apprentices to kill every cat they could get their hands on After killing the favorite cat of their master's (employer's) wife, the workers "drove the other cats across the rooftops, bludgeoning every one within reach and trapping those who tried to escape in strategically placed sacks. They dumped sackloads of half-dead cats in the courtyard. Then the entire workshop gathered round and staged a mock trial. . . . After pronouncing the animals guilty and administering last rites, they strung them up on an improvised gallows."

Does this episode strike you as grisly and barbaric? Most people today would think so. But there is something decidedly peculiar about the whole thing· The workers who participated in the slaughter thought it was all a hilarious joke. The apprentices, says Darnton, were overcome with laughter and joy as they gathered and dispatched the local cats, and, in the days that followed, they riotously reenacted the comic events of the massacre over and over again. The fact that we have trouble appreciating the humor of the slaughter of animals often considered cuddly pets is an indication that we don't know enough about the era and culture we are studying. As Darnton notes: "Our own inability to get the joke, is an indication of the distance that separates us from the workers of preindustrial Europe."[2]

Darnton has presented an interesting puzzle Why did those eighteenth-century workers think killing and torturing cats was so hilariously funny? We can find the answer, as Darnton shows, by examining the historical *context* in which the event took place. To get the "joke" of the cat massacre we have to enter the thought-world of eighteenth-century popular culture. On one level the frolicsome massacre of cats, as it turns out, represented the venting of worker hostility against an overbearing and unpopular employer. For a number of nights the workers had yowled like cats in order to irritate the master who had been mistreating them. In desperation the master ordered the apprentices to get rid of the offensive "cats" The workers did so with great glee,

[1]See Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York Basic Books, 1984)

[2]Darnton, *Cat Massacre,* 76–78

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and in the process killed the house pet of their employer's wife. The master and his wife were outraged, but helpless, in that they themselves had given the order to eliminate the cats.

This helps a little, but it is not enough. The core of Darnton's analysis is his discussion of popular amusements in eighteenth-century Europe and the role cats played in the popular mind. First, the torture of animals of all kinds, but especially cats, was a popular form of entertainment in that era. More important, cats had long been popularly associated with witchcraft, sexuality, and fertility. By first imitating cat cries and then executing the mistress's cat, the apprentices, according to Darnton, were both accusing their master's wife of witchcraft and "assaulting" her in a sexually symbolic way, thus ridiculing the master as having been cuckolded (our phrase would be "cheated on"). To workers who had grown up in a culture that tortured animals for amusement, who had long suffered insults and mistreatment from an unpopular master, the "great cat massacre" was both funny and deeply satisfying.

This bare outline hardly does justice to the sophistication and intricacy of Professor Darnton's analysis. But the essential point should be clear. To "understand" even this relatively minor incident in the history of premodern France, the historian must uncover the rich texture of beliefs, customs, and values within which the event took place. The historian must, in a word, pay very close attention to context.

Context and Historical Understanding

The importance of context in history is based on the simple premise that the past is different than the present, and to interpret the past using the values and beliefs of the present will distort and misrepresent that past.[3] A distinguishing mark of the good historian is the ability to avoid judging past ages by the standards of the present, and to see former societies (to the greatest extent possible) as those societies saw themselves.

It is extremely difficult, even for the most fair-minded of observers, to understand and evaluate the habits, thoughts, and values of people who lived long ago and far away. An analogy would be the difficulty faced by anyone today venturing into a foreign culture. Even in the late twentieth century, travelers abroad confront a bewildering array of customs, practices, laws, and values that seem "strange" and even "illogical" to them as outsiders. For instance, the reverence toward cows that one finds in India bewilders visitors for whom beef is a major source of nourishment. A siesta during the searingly hot hours of midday is mere common sense to residents of many tropical countries, but to some Americans such behavior smacks of laziness. Western visitors to the Middle East or parts of Asia may unwittingly insult the locals by crossing their legs and pointing the sole of their shoe at someone. And so it goes The successful traveler is the individual who is open-minded enough to try to understand these cultural differences and adapt to them

Likewise with the historian embarking on an intellectual journey into the past. In the words of British novelist L. P. Hartley, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."[4] Just as the conscientious traveler today must learn the local cus-

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[3]The notion that the past is radically different from the present is a surprisingly modern notion Throughout much of history people thought of past events as though they were part of present reality Witness the countless Renaissance paintings of Biblical themes in which the figures are dressed in the height of fifteenth century Florentine style!

[4]Quoted in David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1985), xvi

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toms, values, laws, and language to feel at ease in a foreign country, historians must become fully acquainted with the institutions, cultural habits, and beliefs of the society they are studying. Only then can they appreciate the significance and complexity of historical events. As Robert Darnton put it, "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."[5]

To think historically, then, you must constantly remind yourself that the past is different from the present and that historical events must not be evaluated in isolation from the total cultural and intellectual environment of the time in which they took place. To do so is to risk massive oversimplification or, worse, to misunderstand the events completely. A popular story about the Battle of Bunker Hill (June 17, 1775), for instance, holds that the commander of the American troops shouted something like: "Don't fire until you see the whites of their [the British troops'] eyes!" Whether this piece of popular patriotism is true or false, it illustrates the dangers of taking things out of their proper context On the surface the order seems to reinforce a rather idealized vision of the colonial rebels as supermen—determined, stalwart, and brave in the face of an attack by disciplined British regular troops. However, a more intimate knowledge of the conventions and technology of eighteenth-century warfare reveals a more mundane explanation for the famous order. Actually, the muskets of the time were so inaccurate that a soldier had no hope of hitting an enemy infantryman unless he was close enought that one could see the "whites of his eyes." Military necessity, not superior military valor, best explains the famous and stirring order The British commander probably said something similar to his men.

The example above should dramatize the importance of knowing as much as possible about the historical period you are studying in order to interpret the past in a fair-minded manner. The investigator's knowledge, as Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff see it, "must include an understanding of how men in other eras lived and behaved, what they believed, and how they managed their institutions."[6] You should, consequently, always try to "think" your way into an alien situation and empathize with those who live (or lived) there. To the best of your ability you should attempt to see the world through the eyes of those you are trying to study You need not abandon your own values in favor of those of a different place or time. (No need, for instance, to see a massacre of helpless cats as a grand joke.) But you should be able to distance yourself from your own values sufficiently to be able to *understand* why the printer's apprentices thought killing the local cats was so funny. The exercise of such *imaginative sympathy* is a prerequisite of sound historical thinking.

All of this is easier said than done. Very often the tendency to judge the past according to one's own values and standards is inherent in the very nature of historical studies. It is often impossible for the historian to see events exactly as contemporaries saw them for the simple reason that the historian knows "how things came out," whereas the participants did not. Historians narrate and interpret the past with the enormous advantage of hindsight, and it is much easier to be an armchair quarterback than to play the game itself. Hindsight makes it very tempting for the historian to make grand generalizations about the incompetence, naiveté, and shortsightedness of those in the past who could not, as we do, know their future. Allan Nevins, in *The Gateway to History,* points out the fallacy involved with this sort of history. Historical hindsight, Nevins warns, makes past problems seem much more simple (and more easily solv-

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[5]Darnton, *Cat Massacre,* 4

[6]Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff, *The Modern Researcher,* rev ed (New York Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), 116

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able) than they actually were, and "the leaders that dealt with them . . . smaller men."[7] Hindsight, in short, makes it very difficult for even the best-intentioned investigators to approach the trials and triumphs of past ages with true imaginative sympathy.

The difficulty of judging the past by its standards rather than your own is increased when you are trying to understand behaviors repugnant to contemporary moral codes (e.g., "the great cat massacre"). It is difficult to get beyond moral outrage, yet true understanding demands that you do so. The same problem besets historians who write biographies of villains, scoundrels, or the merely unsavory. David Harris Willson confronted this problem when working on a biography of King James I of England (ruled 1603-1625). This biography, still one of the best treatments of this rather flawed and obnoxious king, is a model of impartiality. Willson succeeded in writing a fair and sympathetic treatment of James,[8] in spite of the fact that he never really liked the English king, no matter how hard he tried to do so

Context and Moral Judgments in History

Above we referred to King James I of England as a "rather obnoxious king." In its most basic sense "obnoxious" means "very unpleasant" or "objectionable." What right do we have to be so moralistic and judgmental? Does not such a label violate the central lesson of this chapter—i.e., thou shalt not judge the past by the standards of the present? Is this not a violation of a basic tenet of historical mindedness? Perhaps.

But if after carefully reading and evaluating the relevant original sources of James's reign we conclude that many of James's seventeenth-century contemporaries thought him "obnoxious" (even if they used different words to express it), then we are justified in "calling 'em as we see 'em." That is, the evidence would have justified the use of the term. On the other hand, if we deem James "obnoxious" because *we* find his behavior morally objectionable, that is a different situation altogether. In the latter case we could be accused of interpreting events "out of context" But even in this case the verdict of practicing historians would not be unanimous. There is marked disagreement among professional historians as to the legitimacy of passing moral judgments on past events and individuals.

Any discussion of the importance of thinking contextually about the past ventures into troubled waters when the issue of moral values surfaces. Many practices that today we consider morally reprehensible have been viewed quite differently in the past. Slavery and serfdom, for example, although almost universally condemned today, were historically considered part of the natural order of things. Slavery was a prominent feature of ancient Greek and Roman life, in the European Middle Ages (and much later in Russia and Eastern Europe) serfs lived lives not far removed from those of slaves; and, as everyone knows, slavery was an integral part of the culture of the American South for over two hundred years In cases such as this, what position should the conscientious historian take? Should these past cultures be condemned as "immoral" because they countenanced slavery? Should the historian become a moral "relativist" and judge those societies in terms of his or her own standards of right and wrong? Or should the historian avoid making moral judgments altogether?

Herbert Butterfield, a British historian, believed that moral judgments should be irrelevant to historical understanding. If readers did not recognize the immorality or

[7] Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History* (Chicago Quadrangle Books, 1963), 257

[8] D H Willson, *King James VI & I* (New York Oxford University Press, 1967)

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morality of past deeds, he argued, the historian's moralistic pronouncements would certainly not change their mind. Further, moral judgments would do nothing to help researcher or reader understand the past in any meaningful way. Says Butterfield: "Moral judgments on human beings are by their nature irrelevant to the enquiry and alien to the intellectual realm of scientific history. . These moral judgments must be recognised to be an actual hindrance to enquiry and reconstruction . . ."[9]

Butterfield and those like him are sometimes called "amoralists" That is, they believe that moral judgments do not serve any useful purpose in a historical narrative. Ranked opposite are those who believe historians have a *duty* to inject moral pronouncements into their work. Their case also has merit. This groups believes that certain moral and ethical norms are universal and transcend time and space. It is appropriate, then, to point the finger at evil and condemn it wherever one finds it. As Goldwin Smith wrote, "A sound historical morality will sanction strong measures in evil times; selfish ambition, treachery, murder, perjury, it will never sanction in the worst of times, for these are the things that make times evil—Justice has been justice, mercy has been mercy, honour has been honour, good faith has been good faith, truthfulness has been truthfulness from the beginning."[10] We sacrifice too much, in other words, if we rank "understanding" above defending solid moral values

There are others who occupy a middle ground. This group believes it is legitimate and important for historians to provide moral critiques of the past, but they also believe (along with Butterfield) that the historian should not play the role of the judge, condemning the guilty and absolving the innocent This position is held by American historian John Higham, who believes that what he calls "moral history" can be an important spur to historical understanding. Moral history can help us appreciate the nature and importance of moral imperatives in different times and places. It can help us understand how certain values—honor, courage, and other concepts of "character"—changed over time It can also help us "ponder the moral responsibility of the agents of decision [leaders]," by helping us understand the real alternatives available to leaders at key moments in history. In Higham's words, "The historian is not called to establish a hierarchy of values, but rather to explore a spectrum of human potentialities and achievements"[11] Higham's position, then, is somewhat "relativistic." The historian can and should venture into the realm of moral judgments, but those judgments must take into account the broad context of the time and place being studied.

And the debate goes on. Wherever your sympathies lie on this issue, it is necessary to keep in mind that there is a problem here for which there is no easy solution. It is the historian's job to understand and interpret the past, and this is most difficult if basic moral values are in conflict Perhaps the best advice is this: Be aware of the dilemma, so that in your own studies and researches you can act out of conscious choice rather than ignorance

[9]Quoted in Hans Meyerhoff (ed), *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (New York Doubleday, 1959), 230

[10]Meyerhoff, *Philosophy of History*, 225

[11]John Higham, *Writing American History* (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1970), 150-56

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