

Cat Massacres, the Jones Conundrum, and Peer Review

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Robert Darnton once famously argued that it was what made people laugh that acted as a sure sign of cultural difference. The hilarity among early eighteenth-century Parisian apprentice boys caused by the massacre of cats led Darnton into a fascinating and illuminating discussion of the alien mental world which the boys inhabited. In developing his approach, Darnton admitted a debt to the cultural anthropologist, his Princeton colleague, Clifford Geertz, and his cat massacre essay exemplifies a challenging example of a kind of anthropologically-inflected cultural history.¹

The invitation to write this piece for *H-France Salon* has led me back to Darnton's innovative essay so as to reflect: what have been my own "cat massacre moments" of peer review? What have been the circumstances of exposure to other intellectual cultures that made me think, "Ah! They really do do things differently here?" In fact I can remember quite vividly the occasions on which my exposure to practices of peer review in first North America and then in France caused me to consider in quasi-ethnographic mode not only on how those intellectual cultures differed from my own, but also reflexively to recognize and re-evaluate aspects of my own approach based on my own training in Britain.

The first experience was my attendance at academic seminars in universities in the United States. In 1986 I was lucky enough to be a Fellow at the Davis Center in the History Department at Princeton University and can still remember my sense of awe at the way the seminars were conducted. It helped, of course, that the Director of the Center and chair of the seminar was the great Lawrence Stone and that staff attendees from the department included Bob Darnton, Natalie Davis, Phil Nord, Laura Engelstein, Tony Grafton, Peter Brown, and sundry other luminaries. Even so, the spirit of exchange was one that I have recognized on many other occasions in the United States. It was marked first by a great generosity of spirit, as successive contributors really sought to view the paper under discussion sympathetically and from the inside, to highlight insightful points, and to test hypotheses for water-tightness, informing on any leakages with tact and discretion—and indeed with what seemed genuine concern for the feelings of the seminar giver. I also was struck by the eloquence of discussants, who laid out their intellectual wares without an evident sense of over-preparation and were able to extemporize volubly and passionately about the subject in hand. (When I later commented on my

¹ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). See the comments of Roger Chartier, "Texts, Symbols and Frenchness," *Journal of Modern History* 57 (1985): 682-95; and Darnton's reply, "The Symbolic Element in History," *Journal of Modern History* 58 (1986): 218-234.

reaction to an American colleague, he remarked, “Well we’ve been doing ‘show and tell’ since we were in kindergarten”—an explanation I found attractive if unverifiable.)

In France, my “cat massacre moment” came on the first *soutenance de thèse* that I attended, and indeed since then I always experience the same feeling at these occasions. It is sheer amazement at the diversity and the pyrotechnical brilliance of the intellectual virtuosity on display as each of the members of the *jury* gives his or her opinion—at some length it must be said. (At several *soutenances* I have had the same experience of French colleagues talking with faux-nostalgia over lunch beforehand about the good old days in which a *soutenance* started early in the morning and finished late at night. All present then go on to agree that this time at least we would each carefully restrict our comments to twenty minutes maximum—only for everyone on the *jury* speaking before me at the *soutenance* to break this rule and to expatiate for at least three quarters of an hour.) Whereas American seminar contributors explored inwardly from their different vantage-points the complexities of the paper under discussion, French colleagues used the paper as a kind of launching pad for their own explorations of the thesis topic which might well, but invariably did not always, coincide with anything contained in the actual thesis under review. I am always dazzled and frazzled at *soutenances* and come away feeling I have been participating in a heroic intellectual marathon that is mentally invigorating and physically exhausting—and very different from my own academic world.

My early experiences of my own intellectual culture in Great Britain were not dissimilar in that I did initially feel very much of an ethnographic outsider. I went to Oxford in the late 1960s from a state school and as the first member of my family ever to go to a university. I developed a (surely unhealthy?) penchant for attending academic seminars even when I was a callow undergraduate. Much of what went on at these events was over my head, but in retrospect, piecing together my memories, what I now realize was that for the paper-givers, these sessions were truly terrifying occasions. I noticed how violently the hands of even very senior figures shook as they turned the pages of their talk. Though invariably delivered in a monotone and at breathtaking speed, papers often went on for an hour or more—I now realize this was a deliberate ploy on the part of speakers so as to reduce the time for discussion. Once the discussion started, however, there seemed to be three basic moves taking place. The first—and usually the most frightening of all—was silence. That is, some huge faculty *éminence grise* would turn up but be conspicuously silent throughout the session, save only for the occasional inchoate snort of derision. The second move was the rapier thrust. A celebrated don would give a comprehensive analysis of, say, the nineteenth-century Tory party, and at question-time, an etiolated, bored-looking figure in the far corner of the room would utter with studied nonchalance, “I see you are not mentioning the Church of England?” Much sardonic, Schadenfreude-laden raising of one eyebrow at the speaker’s punctured ego, with wicked sidelong glances, would flash feverishly around the room. Third, most spectacularly of all, there was the sabre attack. Here, one—or even more scarily, more than one—colleague rose to deliver a dazzling, slashing, swashbuckling, no-holds-barred display of Why The Speaker Is Completely And Utterly Wrong. At the end of such sessions, the humiliated speaker, while desperately seeking to perform the smiling niceties of aimless chat, would hit the sherry bottle very hard indeed before going off, I imagine, to some far-flung corner of a foreign quadrangle that is forever Oxford, where he could disembowel himself in peace.

Seminar as therapy in North America, as firework display in France, and as blood sport in Britain—these are, of course, only *images d'Épinal* that bear the impress of my own, now very dated, personal experience. And of course, it would be dangerous to regard them as accurate, ethnographically-inflected depictions of eternal verities about peer review in three essentialized academic cultures. In more recent times, moreover, the internationalization of the academic profession and the globalization of scholarly communication have certainly knocked many of the corners off some geographically-specific practices. Yet even so, my strong sense is that these normalizing trends have not led to a general leveling-out of practice, and on the contrary they have even—this is the “Jones Conundrum”²—led to the accentuation of local differences in academic cultures. I imagine many readers of this article will only have to compare the different reactions that an identical seminar paper provokes in American, British and French venues to endorse this feeling.

If the “Jones Conundrum” does indeed have traction, then this has important consequences for peer review, which increasingly operates on a transnational global scale. This is all the more the case, first, in that the reach of peer review is now extremely wide. It determines which articles are published and where; it is deployed by publishers over acceptance of book manuscripts; it seems to enter into promotion cases more than it ever did in the past; and it is vital in terms of external grant capture, which plays an unprecedented role in many academic cultures. Yet if peer review is an expansive commodity, it is also under threat in ways that make the Jones Conundrum all the more pertinent. Really good peer review is hard to come by—time seems too short for all the peer review demands one receives—so that institutional bodies are always looking for other, simpler, and less time-consuming ways of adjudging quality.

We in the British university system often bemoan the government’s research assessment exercises that we are put through every few years. Yet despite their manifest drawbacks, these do have the signal advantage of adjudging quality of outputs based on peer review. Threats to move away from this means of accessing government funding would almost certainly entail a move to other criteria wholly inimical to the humanities, such as citation indices or overall research grant income. These are battles the humanities will never win. Peer review has the considerable advantage that it really is done by our peers and not by some faceless bureaucrat in search of a convenient and time-efficient algorithm.

Peer review is a precious commodity. But to be effective and beneficial it also, I would argue, needs to take into account the kind of transnational cultural differences that I have evoked. It would be disastrous, for example, for a candidate’s chances of following a university career in France if at the *soutenance* the thesis was not awarded with the highest level of distinction (*mention très honorable, félicitations unanimes*, etc.—the formulas change). Yet by my experience not all non-French *jury*-members realize this.

Similarly, a less than eulogious journal review of a first book by a European reviewer can, I have been told, damage a candidate’s chances of being tenured in an American university. This is one

² Colin Jones, “Twenty Years After.” *French Historical Studies*, 32 (2009): 679-687—critically discussed in Rebecca Spang, “Self, Field, Myth: What We Will Have Been,” *H-France Salon*, vol. 1 (2009), issue 1, no. 3 (<http://www.h-france.net/Salon/Salon1Spang3.pdf>).

reason, I must admit, that I rarely undertake such reviews unless I am pretty sure I will be very positive. Even so, when I do I still worry that my tendency in reviews to follow the British (and, I think, the European) model of reviewing can cause unintended harm across the Atlantic. My idea of a decent book review includes consideration of what the book is trying to do, how far it succeeds, what are the areas of weakness, and what overall judgment can one make. Yet on reading book reviews by American colleagues I sometimes get a sense of chewing cotton wool or bathing in some bland luke-warm element which lacks any analytical rigor or critical faculty. Too much positivity can be a bad thing all round.

Consequently, when I am asked to peer review a candidate's case for tenure in a North American university, I often think it prudent to state that the review panel needs to bear in mind that I am writing according to British rather than American criteria—that they will get litotes, in other words, rather than hyperbole. At the other end of the line, when serving on appointment panels in Britain I have seen references from U.S. colleagues for their candidates which are so long and so fulsome and stuffed with unqualified praise that I have seriously doubted the sincerity (and just occasionally the sanity) of the reference-writer.

Sometimes the problems are institutional as well as transnational. As someone who has sat on very many grant-awarding bodies (and disbursed literally tens of millions of pounds sterling over my career), I do get fed up with blandness in peer review. By failing to engage analytically with an application and serving up vague and woolly comments in justification of an alpha rating, peer reviewers fail in their duties—and pass on the job of assessment to the panel, thus producing an arbitrary element into decision-making. This problem is of course particularly acute with transnational funding bodies.

As I have indicated, there are certainly some real problems with peer review—especially if it is done poorly and if it fails to take into account the specificities of institutional and transnational academic cultures. But despite the drawbacks, it is still the very best means we have of evaluating quality, and in the interests of our colleagues, especially those entering the profession, we should treasure and cherish it and be willing to fight for it if necessary.³

If we are to nurture peer review within our profession we should welcome more public conversations about its mechanics and value—which is one reason why I welcome this H-France initiative. It also means we probably need to think harder about how we persuade universities, grant-giving bodies, publishers, and editors of the value of peer review and about how we inform them of its subtleties. Maybe there is a case for offering training sessions in peer review for colleagues coming up through the system? And maybe—heretical, though possibly counter-productive thought—we should work towards peer reviewers being reimbursed for their time? By my own experience, having witnessed peer review at close quarters over the years, one has to conclude—sadly, perhaps—that the peer reviews that are paid for are generally better than those that are not.

³ In Britain, the government's plans for encouraging open access publishing have been criticised for not taking properly into account the place of learned societies and their journals in our intellectual ecology. This relates especially to the fact that peer review costs money. See the website of the Royal Historical Society (<http://www.royalhistsoc.org>) for this continuing struggle.

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H-France Salon
Volume 7 (2015), Issue 20, #9
ISBN 2150-4873