

Week9 New Cultural History

1. Lynn Hunt shows us a fascinating “parallel” between the cultural expressions (paintings and novels) of public imagination on the polity as family and the actual political process before, during, and after the French Revolution. Her evidences are convincing enough to me. She is not satisfied, however, with showing a mere parallel between culture and politics. Culture is not a simple reflection of politics and society. Hunt says, “An enormous amount of cultural and ideological work had to be undertaken in the second half of the 1790s in order to assimilate and recast the revolutionary experience” (p.190). Here, culture is something that can “assimilate” or “recast” political and social experience and also something that has to be “undertaken.” She even goes further to say that “Even before the beginning of the Revolution, then, novelists had begun to explore the consequences of a world without fathers” (p.36). Here, change in culture precedes political change. This being said, the “new cultural history” won’t be the “history of culture” at all. Can we call it then as the “history seen through the culture”? Or, is it something more profound than that?

2. Lynn Hunt seems to be interested less in “what really happened” than in “how they perceived what was happening.” Even though she is dealing with one of the most important event in history, her point is not what happened during the Revolution, but how French people imagined their Revolution with their imagination on family. It is more so in the case of Robert Darnton’s book *The Great Cat Massacre*. In Darnton’s essays, the events are often mere happenings of meager significance in history. The “Great Cat Massacre” was in fact the killing of several cats! Through those little episodes, Darnton attempts to show how ordinary people perceived the world they were living in. Darnton calls it the history of mentalite. I think this is where the new cultural history diverges from social history and economic history. But, what shaped this French perception of the world? What distinguished French worldview from German or English worldview? Aren’t these also meaningful questions in history and don’t we have to go back to social/economic history to answer these questions? Which comes first? Socio-economic experiences or cultural meanings? I think it was E.P. Thompson who already raised this puzzling question of experience and meaning.