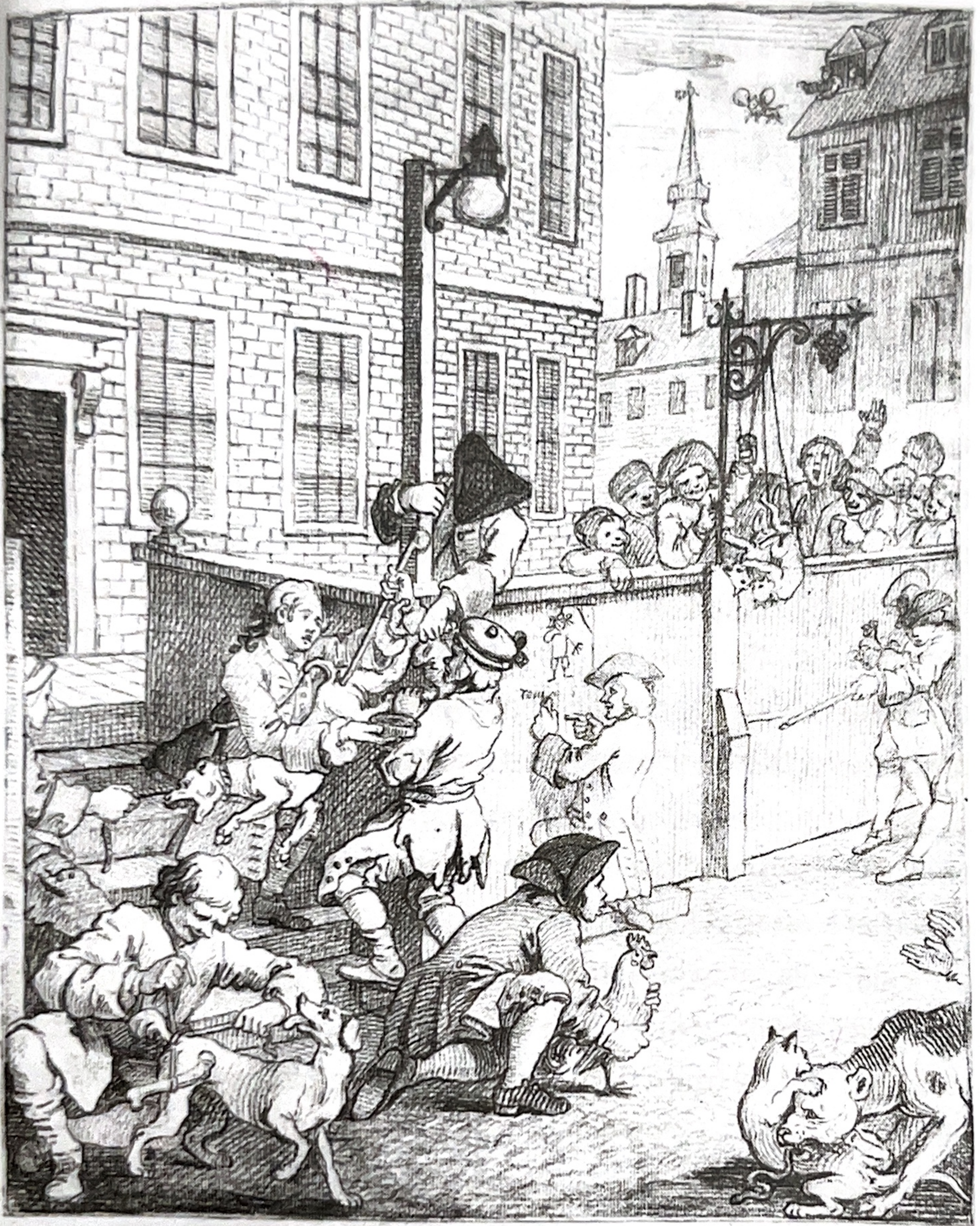


Chapter 6

The killing of cats; or, is the past a foreign country?

The killing of cats has a *history*. That is to say, it is an activity that has changed over time, and hence can be described and analysed by historians, as can activities such as marriage, religion, eating, navigation, genocide, catching fish, cross-dressing, smelling things, and sex. A very brief history of cat killing would read something like this: in Ancient Egypt, cats were revered and honoured, and so when their masters and mistresses died, the felines were walled up in their tombs to keep them company, and thus asphyxiated. In the early Middle Ages of Europe (c.400–1000), cats were much less respected, and mostly died natural deaths, such as from starvation. In the later Middle Ages (c.1000–1450) the feline passed to the other end of the spectrum, and became associated with the devil. Kissing a cat on the anus was understood to be a common habit amongst Cathars and other heretics – or, at least, that is what their persecutors alleged. Some Cathars also believed in the demonic connection. One man claimed that when the inquisitor Geoffroi d’Ablis died, black cats appeared on his coffin, indicating that the devil had come to reclaim his own. So, in medieval times, cats were killed because they were feared, despatched by, for example, having stones thrown at them. By the seventeenth century, the public image of the cat had further deteriorated: it was understood to be the familiar of witches, and was therefore executed along with its mistress or master. In eighteenth-century France, on occasion, large numbers of cats were massacred in mock rituals by apprentices and



18. Killing cats (and mistreating other animals) in the eighteenth century. (Hogarth, *The Four Stages of Cruelty*)

others, who thought the killing very funny. In our own enlightened twentieth century we do not, of course, kill cats; except by neglect, over-feeding, and when it is for their own good.

In the last chapter we described historians as belonging to various different tribes: political, social, cultural. But we also noted that, although these labels are given and accepted by historians (used, for example, when advertising academic jobs) they are not hard and fast boundaries. There is, however, one core difference that divides all historians into two groups: those who believe that people in the past were essentially the same as us; and those who believe that they were essentially different. You might remember this division from our earlier chapters: David Hume thought that all 'men' were so much the same in every age; L. P. Hartley suggested that the past is a foreign country where they do things differently from us. Given that the death of felines does not normally cause hilarity in our present day, an account of eighteenth-century apprentices finding humour in killing cats can provide us with a good example to think through this dichotomy.

History

We know about what the historian Robert Darnton has labelled 'the Great Cat Massacre' from an autobiography (semi-fictionalized but generally believed to be authentic) written by a printer's apprentice called Nicolas Contat in Paris in the late 1730s. Whether or not Contat's account is literally true, Darnton argues, it nonetheless shows us a story which Contat expected to be read and *understood* by his contemporaries. Documents can show us a 'truth' beyond 'what actually happened': they can demonstrate *how* people think, the images and language and associations they can draw upon from their culture.

What Contat described was this: two apprentices, Jerome (Contat's fictional self) and Léveillé, lived and worked in a printing shop owned by their master, Jacques Vincent. The master's wife adored cats, having a favourite called *la grise* (the gray). Over several nights, Léveillé, who was

a remarkable mimic, crept outside the window of his master's bedroom, and howled like a cat, thus keeping his employers awake. The mistress eventually commanded the apprentices to get rid of these awful (imaginary) cats, although warning them to avoid harming *la grise*, her pet. The apprentices set to work killing cats, every one that they could find in the neighbourhood – but began with *la grise*, hiding its body. The rest they slaughtered openly, knocking them unconscious and then sentencing them to death as part of a mock trial. They even provided the cats with a confessor before executing them! The mistress reappeared, and was convinced – but could not prove – that they had murdered *la grise*. The master turned up, and berated them for enjoying themselves killing cats rather than getting on with their work. And the apprentices laughed and laughed. 'Printers know how to laugh', Contat writes; 'it is their sole occupation'.

Contat makes it clear in his narrative that killing the cats was a way of getting at the master, and that the life of a printer's apprentice was not a very happy one. He contrasts the opulence of his employer's lifestyle with his own miserable state. Keeping cats as pets (and caring for them better than the apprentices) serves as an image to emphasize the self-indulgence of the *bourgeois* master, and his distance from the lives of his workers. But this does not really explain the wholesale slaughter, or the laughter (which occurs not only after the bloody deed, but during it too). To do that, as Darnton points out, we need to examine the varied symbolism of cats in the eighteenth century. They were still associated with witchcraft and bad luck. They were also connected to the upper orders of society – not only through their indulgence as pets, but also through folktales such as 'Puss in Boots', and perhaps because of their natural air of indolence. Torturing cats was common in several strands of European culture, as part of rituals of license and disorder. And cats were associated with women and with sex; *la chatte* having the double meaning of 'pussy' in modern English. Contat's massacre of cats made sense to an eighteenth-century Frenchman in a way in which we no longer respond ourselves. The apprentices, Contat tells us, would

re-enact the massacre in mime on many future occasions, satirizing the reactions of the master and mistress for the amusement of their fellows. The laughter of the apprentices – for it is more a tale about humour than about cats – can be seen as part of an early-modern tradition of rebellion through mockery, a linking of riotous behaviour and humour.

We might then posit a particular ‘eighteenth-century way of thinking’ which associated cats with privilege, and the killing of cats with rebellion. We might also (as Darnton suggests) see links between a ‘way of thinking’ which delighted in slaughtering cats at a mock court with later events in eighteenth-century France. During the French Revolution, for example, the rudimentary trials and subsequent massacres of more than a thousand ‘counter-revolutionary’ prisoners in September 1792 by the *sans-culottes* (literally ‘those without britches’, but figuratively ‘the have-nots’). This is not to argue that the killing of cats was a practice for the killing of men, but to suggest that there can be symbolic patterns to people’s actions. The idea of there being different ‘ways of thinking’ in the past has had a number of labels: the ‘spirit of an age’ or *zeitgeist*; ‘cultural consciousness’; the *mentalité* (or ‘mentality’) of a particular time.

It is this last term which has become most common. *Mentalité* was used originally in the first half of the twentieth century by Lucien Febvre, a French historian who started, with his friend Marc Bloch, a new kind of history known as the ‘*Annaliste*’ approach (named after the journal they founded, called *Annales*). The *Annales* school had several aims. One was to shift the study of history away from political events (effecting another escape from Thucydides’ tower) to questions of economy, society, and culture. Another was to try to examine much broader sweeps of history – what they called the *longue durée* (long term) – and search for deep-rooted currents in the past. Linked to this was a desire to include a knowledge of climatic change, geographical location, and lengthy economic shifts in their understanding of historical causation. This project reached its culmination in Fernand Braudel’s *The*

Mediterranean, a massive book which attempts to discuss that huge geographical area over several centuries, shifting the focus of enquiry from kings and governments to the land, the people, and the sea. The Annales school drastically changed the shape of historiography on the continent, although the adoption of its broader aims has been less apparent in Anglo-American history. But the notion of *mentalité* has been hugely influential on all modern historians.

Thinking about *mentalité* arose as a way of trying to get away from the 'common-sense' approach of political history, which assumed that kings, counsellors, and governors made decisions on the same 'rational' basis as the historian (and thus allowed the political historian to judge the king as 'bad' or 'weak' when they failed to make the 'right' decisions); but also as an attempt to explain elements within the sources they examined which simply did not seem to fit with contemporary ideas of what was normal. Marc Bloch, for example, analysed the phenomenon of the 'King's Touch' – the putative ability of medieval monarchs to cure diseases through physical contact. He argued that this kind of action could not be discarded as a historical curiosity, unconnected to the serious business of government, but was an integral part of royal authority – and therefore alerts us to how very *different* medieval notions of power were from our own. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (another *Annaliste* historian) used inquisition records, similar to those we met in the first chapter, to chart the *mentalité* of peasants: their beliefs on magic, ritual, friendship, family, and sex. *Mentalité* is born, therefore, from a sense that the past is very different from the present; and from trying to find a way of analysing those differences, rather than laughing at them.

What the Annales school drew upon, and what later historians have continued to utilize, were the insights of a different discipline: anthropology. Historians interested in society and culture find that they need a way of thinking about the patterns of human interaction, the *unstated* (and sometimes unrecognized) reasons why people do the

things that they do. Anthropologists, who have spent their time studying and analysing other cultures, have provided useful frameworks for thinking these things through, giving historians a language for discussing ritual, the arrangement of social space, the conduct of one gender to another, and so on. *Mentalité* has become a shorthand term for summing up all of the various assumptions, practices, and rituals found in past eras.

Using the term *mentalité* involves, as I have suggested, seeing people in the past as essentially different from our own time. We shall return later to the question of whether or not this insight is correct. We should note first of all that the idea of *mentalité* also involves two other cognitive operations: dividing the span of human history into periods; and reading historical evidence in ways never intended by its creators.

As we have seen, the impossible vastness of time has, at least since the Christian era, been divided up into more manageable proportions, such as Augustine's Six Ages of Man. The broadest and most common division is that of Antiquity, Medieval (or Middle Ages), and Modern (allowing also for the nuances of late Antiquity; early, high, and late Medieval; and early Modern). An obvious but essential point: these are divisions made by human beings, and are therefore arbitrary. People living in the 'early middle ages' would not – *could not* – have given that label to themselves. As far as they were concerned, they were living in 'now', just like us. They might have had different ideas about where their 'now' was going – that it was the last step on the journey to the end of the world and God's judgement – but it was still 'now'. We look back and carve out arbitrary lines in the sand, slicing off that period from this one, cutting over two thousand years of complexity into shapes more easily digestible. I have already mentioned the large slices: Ancient, Medieval and Modern. But there are smaller slices too, which we are wont to forget: centuries and decades for example. The 'eighteenth century' is a quick way of referring to the years 1700–1799, but it is an arbitrary division nonetheless. The modern, Western

calendar has only been in operation for a few hundred years, and is culturally specific (it does not, for example, follow the same years as the Jewish or Chinese calendars). Thinking in 'centuries' as opposed to, say, 'kings' reigns' has only been common in the last two hundred years or so. When Thucydides wrote his history of the Peloponnesian war, he was hampered in producing a clear chronology for his readers by the fact that different Greek cities dated their years idiosyncratically, and even had different names for the months of the year. He had to invent his own system (he numbered the years of the war one to six, and divided them into 'winter' and 'summer') whereas we have inherited our own – similarly invented – scheme.

But these lines in the sand come to have wider associations: if we want to talk about an 'eighteenth-century way of thinking', do we suppose that this changed into something else on the midnight of 31st December 1799? We talk in the West of 'the Sixties' and 'the Seventies' to indicate something we feel to be essential or particular about those decades. But again this is shorthand – and recently modern historians have started to argue that 'the Sixties' (by which they mean a set of cultural ideas and values) *really* ran from about 1964 to 1974. Similarly, other historians sometimes discuss 'the long eighteenth century'; that is, a century that somehow extends beyond the hundred years usually expected. This process of carving time into periods is undoubtedly useful, and perhaps unavoidable, but one needs to be wary of it. Did everyone in 'the Sixties' wear flowers in their hair, get stoned, and go to Woodstock? Did even *most* of the people do those things? If not, why do we choose this mode of life – this *mentalité* – as the 'key' image for that decade?

Recently, there was concern in much of the developed world about possible disasters occurring in the year 2000, because it marks a millennium. Some of these worries are extreme, such as those of the 'Heaven's Gate' cult members who chose to commit suicide in the United States, believing that God's judgement was nigh. Others are

seen as fairly rational, such as concerns about computer chips failing because of an inability to cope with the new date. We might, however, remember that people living before the year 1000 also experienced a degree of worry – probably more so, in fact, given that a belief in God's plan to draw human history to a close was rather more firmly held in those days. And we could also contemplate the fact that 'the year 2000' (microchip design faults notwithstanding) is a human invention, based on an arbitrary calendar only recently brought into use by one part of the world's population. What is it, exactly, that we think alters within ourselves when the year changes from '99' to '00'?

This does not mean, however, that the arbitrary division of time into periods is irrelevant to human life and history. Although the date of the millennium is arbitrary, it has undeniably affected how people behave. It has been talked about in detail on radio, television, and the Internet. It leads different people to hoard food, or to find a god, or to lose their faith, or to get very drunk, or to conceive children. It has been on our minds – part of our *mentalité*, perhaps. But it presumably will not be on the minds of people at the end of the twenty-first century, or at least will not be thought about in quite the same way. Similarly, people in the eighteenth century *did* think (and therefore act) differently from ourselves, on certain topics at least. Periodization – the division of time into smaller units – may lure us into false patterns of thought, but it is perhaps unavoidable as a way of viewing the past, and may help us to capture something of how people change over time.

To get at different ways of thinking, different *mentalités*, requires a careful use of source material. It may demand, as I have suggested, reading the material in a way in which its creators never intended, for meanings they never considered. This is often called 'reading against the grain' by modern historians; 'the grain' being the direction and argument the source *wants* to take. It should be fairly obvious that for an historian to read certain sources necessarily involves using them in a different way from their creators. For example, when fifteenth-century

Florentine officials created a massive tax record, called the *catasto*, their purpose was the financial government of their city. Modern historians have, however, taken this vast source and entered its information onto a computer database. This allowed them to see patterns in the evidence that the Florentines could never have spotted (having neither the interest nor the time): patterns of marriage, life cycle, family, gender, and the division of labour.

But other sources may be more problematic. Take, for example, John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, a book of political philosophy written in the twelfth century. The idea of the *Policraticus* was to provide a model for royal government, and (unlike tax records) it was designed to be read by other people, not only from the author's time but in later years also. Historians can, however, read the *Policraticus* in a different way: noting John of Salisbury's use of 'the body' as an image of society (the King as the head, his counsellors as the heart, peasants as the feet and so on), they can argue that the symbol tries to provide a 'natural' and static image of medieval society, and can link this to other, frequent, uses of 'body' images in medieval culture, perhaps thus identifying a medieval *mentalité*. John of Salisbury did not 'know' that he was writing about symbolic bodies – he thought he was writing about politics. But historians can find other meanings in his text. Does this give us pause for doubt? How would we feel if some later impertinent scholar read our letters, our diaries, our emails, and argued that we did not 'know' what we were revealing when we wrote?

We might feel indignant (though, of course, we would also be dead). But one should note that whether we like it or not, texts have lives that continue to change and alter *after* the death of the author, whether or not historians get involved. The *Policraticus*, for example, was read by later writers of political theory, and they used it in rather different ways, taking other meanings from it. At a certain point it became not a model for good government, but an interesting anachronism from a past age, which allowed more 'modern' thinkers to provide better models. This

process of texts changing in meaning is not confined to learned books: you may have heard the American songwriter Bruce Springsteen's track *Born in the USA*. This was written as a protest song, about the after-effects of the Vietnam War on American servicemen, and the way in which their society had failed them. It was, however, quickly appropriated as an anthem of patriotic pride by the right-wing Reagan administration. This is the way of things: write, sing, say *anything* and it can come to mean something different. It might also tell the audience something about the author, of which the author is not fully aware. This book, as much as any other, may well display my unconscious prejudices, and perhaps those of my generation. Why have I chosen the *particular* historical examples I have used in these chapters? Obviously because I thought they were interesting, and worth thinking about; but they were *my* choices, made at a particular moment in time, within a particular cultural context.

History
Reading sources 'against the grain' is, then, not only permissible but probably essential, if we wish to get at not only 'what' people thought, but also *how* they did their thinking. The language and images and symbols found in documents have become of increasing interest to historians in the last two decades, in part because of the influence of literary theorists on the historical profession. Words used as insults, in different times and places, can for example show fascinating changes in culture: in the Middle Ages you might be called a 'dog' or a 'goat'; in the early modern period, one is more likely a 'jade' or 'rogue'. The former comes from the rural context, and the symbolism of animals; the latter, from ideas about sexual and social honour. But there is another problem here, again one of language. When the historian comes to write his or her true story, how does he or she translate a past *mentalité* for a modern audience? Whose words do you use to explain the source (and therefore the past): those of the dead, or those of the living?

The words of the dead can be tricky. Sometimes they are the same as, or similar to, our words, but mean different things: 'farm', for example,

meant a rent or tax for medieval people, and in the early modern period 'lewd' (or 'lewed') indicated a lack, not of civility, but of learning. A similar problem will presumably affect later historians when they look back at the 1980s and discover various things contrarily described as 'bad' or 'wicked'. Contat's apprentices describe their master as 'bourgeois', but this pre-dated and was not the same as Karl Marx's more familiar use of the term.

Furthermore, to describe something 'as people in the past would have understood it' really means to describe events as *particular* historical people understood them, or wished them to be understood. The medieval chroniclers who recorded the English uprising of 1381 describe a mindless revolt by people acting like 'animals' – but this is not how the rebels saw matters (they thought they were acting as good English subjects, appealing to the king). Contemporary English reports of the French Revolution depict a similarly barbarous picture of the *sans-culottes*, afraid that 'the mob' might also rise up on their side of the Channel; again, however, the Revolutionaries thought they were fighting for liberty, equality, fraternity.

The historian needs to be aware of the nuances of past language – understanding, for example, the changing focus and sense of a tricky word such as 'rights' in different times and places – but must not become a slave to archaic vocabulary. 'Democracy' was born in ancient Athens, or so we like to believe; but no historian of antiquity would equate the government of that city with twentieth-century representative politics. The founders of the American Constitution spoke of 'rights' in universal and 'natural' terms ('We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .'), but they did not believe that women or the poor should have the vote, and they owned slaves. They were not complete hypocrites, but partly products of their time, and of what they took for granted in their world. It is, however, much easier to take something for granted – such as slavery – if it benefits you personally. Indeed not every eighteenth-century American supported slavery, and some political

radicals were extremely critical of the practice. The words of the time are, once again, the words of *particular* groups of people, and are thus implicated in struggles of power.

The words of the living can also, however, cause us problems. Using modern labels to describe the past can be dangerously anachronistic, particularly if those labels refer to concepts which, although recently invented, lay claim to universal applicability across time and culture. Describing Renaissance Italian city-states as 'democratic', because they allowed certain citizens to elect particular officials, is to apply very modern associations of what is right and just – two other troublesome words – to a distant situation. Contemporaries would have talked of 'the common good', of 'good government', having their own models of how things were best run. Other words can be much more tricky: 'to fall in love' with someone perhaps carries, for us, images of shooting stars, soul-mates, eyes meeting, hearts beating as one. This notion of 'love' was an invention of the nineteenth century; people 'loved' in previous times, but their ideas of what that involved and meant were different, less involved, for example, with the linking of two individuals and more aware of how different families would be drawn together by marriage. This is not to deny emotion to past people – but to allow them *their* emotions, rather than to transpose onto them our own.

Sometimes it is undeniably useful to apply particular words backwards across time, allowing the historian to sum up some process or state that was only half seen by contemporaries. The danger here, however, is when the reasons for coining a term are forgotten, and repeated usage hardens it into something taken for granted and unexamined. Historical periods and events are particularly prone to this process: 'the Renaissance' and 'the Enlightenment', for example, can gain a false coherence and solidity through the familiarity of their use. Even something as prosaic as 'the English Civil War' causes problems: some historians argue that other terms, such as 'Revolt' or 'Revolution' would serve better (and mean something rather different). And, in any case,

there was not one single war, but rather a series of conflicts – at least three English civil wars during the course of the seventeenth century. Another example of a tricky word is the term ‘feudalism’, used to describe the medieval social hierarchy of people bound by a combination of land-holding and accompanying duties. This word was a much later invention, and as various people have argued, it obscures the various arcane and disparate combinations of land-duties, wages, customs, and laws found in the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, it continues to be used; perhaps, simply, because it is a useful shorthand.

This returns us to the idea of *mentalité*, which is a shorthand for something about the culture of an age and how it affects people’s thoughts and actions. I suggested above that one thing that divides historians is whether they believe people in the past were essentially the same as us, or essentially different. There is perhaps a further question: whether, when using a term like *mentalité*, a historian thinks that there is a unitary pattern to the thoughts of a particular period; whether people in, say, the sixteenth century are different from us, but different from us *in the same way*. To talk of a ‘sixteenth-century way of thinking’ or a ‘sixteenth-century *mentalité*’ can be to suggest that there is an essence of ‘sixteenth-century-ness’, a key or core which the historian can identify. If there *is*, this leads to a further question: if they are so different from us, how is the historian able to understand them at all?

It has been suggested that despite changes over time, there are certain things which all human beings experience throughout history, which therefore link us together: birth, sex, and death. (In fact, one could presumably also argue in this line that all human beings have experienced tiredness, headaches, and indigestion, but since these do not seem as dramatic or philosophical, we will pass over them). From these key moments of humanity, it is claimed, we can build a true understanding of past lives; stepping into their heads and thinking their thoughts once again.

The problem with this is that two of those three key moments we do not *experience* ourselves, at least not in any way we can report (I have never heard anyone describe, in convincing terms, the feeling of being born or what it is like to be dead). We have other people's experiences of observing or interacting with these moments – and here history enters once again, as these things have changed over time. Birth, for example: how women got pregnant, how they understood the process of gestation, who would be present at the birth, the rituals around birth, the treatment of new-born infants – all of these things have varied over time and place. Some ancient theories of conception maintained that only the man's seed was essential, and that the woman was simply a vessel. Certain medieval doctors thought that the woman supplied 'seed' also, and some believed that the woman had to have an orgasm in order to conceive. But, by the nineteenth century, men had somehow forgotten that women could have orgasms. Caesarian deliveries were occasionally performed in the Middle Ages, but carried with them connotations of the devil, as the child would be 'not of woman born'. Nowadays they are very common in Western societies. In the past, infants were sometimes deliberately left alone outside overnight, to see whether they were strong enough to survive (because who wants to feed an extra mouth if the child will not live very long?). In recent times, people have been arrested for leaving their children alone for less than an hour.

Death – other people's experience and understanding of death – has also varied enormously. Pre-Christian warriors hoped to meet a quick, short death, hopefully heroically in battle. Christian knights wished for long deaths, so that they would know what was coming and would have time to prepare their earthly goods and their souls. Some people used to think it was fitting and honourable to eat people as a form of burial. Some other people thought it was reasonable to lock up fellow human beings in camps in their millions and to kill them systematically. Enemies of those people thought it was a good idea to drop bombs so powerful they could kill hundreds of thousands of individuals in an

instant. Some of the people who died would have thought that their souls were going to be reborn in new bodies; others thought they would live in a world beyond this world; still more thought that nothing further would happen, that death was a big full stop.

The point here is that whilst it is true that every person in every time is born and will die, their ideas about those processes vary so wildly that it is difficult to see any 'essence' there, for a historian to hang on to. Sex (which, in any case, not every person experiences, either through choice or chance) is even more chaotic. Every single period of history has had its own ideas about what combinations of age, gender, colour, position, purpose, and duration are desirable, possible, permissible, and respectable.

But so too has every human being alive today. Certainly, we tend to group together in our preferences and prejudices, and our individual imaginations are maybe not so large. But collectively we are multiple, complex, and extraordinary. I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that we, in the twentieth century, do not kill cats and find it funny. In general, of course, this is true; but it is also not the whole story. Although I've never seen it happen, I have read sufficient accounts of American teenagers torturing cats with fireworks, because they thought it funny, to suspect that this has occurred in reality. The problem – but perhaps also the solution – with *mentalité* is that the people of the past are as different from us as we are *from ourselves*. At certain moments they – and we – cohere around different patterns of behaviour, and the historian can certainly seek out those patterns; but they are neither entirely the same nor entirely different from us. Perhaps one of the things historians might do is help us to reflect on both parts of that statement, to look at the past to help us see the present anew.

This raises the question of what we think history is *for*, and why we ought to bother to do it. In the next chapter we will think some more about truth and interpretation, and why history matters.