

Robert Darnton

Historiker und Augenzeuge



Robert Darnton (b. 1939) is Professor at Harvard University since 1972, Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of European History since 1985 and Director of the Program in European Cultural Studies in Princeton since 1987. He was Guggenheim Fellow in 1970; Directeur d'Etudes, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris 1971, 1981, and 1985 (part-time); Fellow, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California 1973-74; Fellow, Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, 1976-77; Member, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton 1977-81 (part-time); George Eastman Visiting Professor, Oxford University 1986-87; and Lecturer, Collège de France 1987 (part-time). He is a Fellow of several academies and member of various editorial boards and committees. In addition to seventy articles, some of which have been incorporated in the following books, he has published *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (1968), *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopedie, 1775-1800* (1979), *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (1982), *Bohème littéraire et révolution. Le monde de livres au XVIIIe siècle* (1983), *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984), *Revolution in Print: the Press in France, 1775-1800* (1989), *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (1989), *Edition et sédition dans la France pré-révolutionnaire* (to be published in 1991) and *Berlin Journal, 1989-1990* (also to be published in 1991). Address: Department of History, Princeton University, 129 Dickinson Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA.

I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg in September, 1989, with the hope of writing two books about eighteenth-century France. The first was nearly completed, because I had worked up most of it for a series of lectures at the Collège de France: *Edition et sédition dans la France pré-révolution-*

naire. By January I had added some new chapters and had done enough polishing to send the typescript off to Gallimard for publication sometime in 1991. The book brings together research done in Swiss and French archives in an attempt to reconstruct the world of illegal literature in France during the two decades before the Revolution. It deals with the elusive contemporary notions of the taboo in literature, with the way publishers sounded the literary market and developed strategies for selling books, with the role of booksellers as cultural middlemen, and with the books themselves. I have tried to reconstitute the entire corpus of forbidden literature, 720 titles in all, and to show which books, authors, and genres were most in demand. The result, I hope, will be a full account of the literature that actually circulated "under the cloak". It may provoke some new debate about the ideological origins of the French Revolution.

The second book, a volume of documents about the policing of writers in Paris around 1750, did not get written. I shipped all the material back to the United States, because by October it had become apparent to all of us that changes of monumental importance were occurring in the German Democratic Republic and throughout Eastern Europe. As a specialist in the study of the French Revolution, I am supposed to have some knowledge about revolutions in general. Here was something that smelled like a revolution exploding under my very nose. I decided to drop everything and follow the events as closely as possible. Not that I could pretend to know much about either East or West Germany. My only advantage, if I had one, was that I knew that I knew nothing.

So I wandered off into the GDR, asking naive questions. The East Germans turned out to be surprisingly eager to answer them. Having been forced to keep quiet for forty years, they had a great deal to say. To my amazement, I found myself listening to native informants in places where they seemed least likely to talk. Two censors explained how they attempted to control East German literature from the Ministry of Culture in East Berlin. The municipal councillor for environmental affairs in Bitterfeld described how he tried to cope with pollution in the dirtiest city in Europe. A pair of garage mechanics explained the mysteries of the Trabi and of the system of barter and influence peddling that lay behind it. While conducting interviews, I tried to cover events, from the fall of the Wall on November 9 through the fusion of the East and West German economies on July 1. The result is a book, *Berlin-Journal, 1989-1990*, which will appear in early 1991. It is closer to journalism than to Wissenschaft, I fear. But I could not resist the temptation to write it.

Insofar as this effort contributes to an understanding of this extraordinary year, it owes a great deal to the Wissenschaftskolleg. Not only did the Rektor permit me to stray out of the Wallotstrasse, but the staff

helped me find my way through the mysteries of East German train schedules and "telecommunications". Other fellows proved to be a generous source of information and suggestions — not merely Fritz Dieckmann, who knows the GDR from the inside, but also Fellow fellow-travelers like Ian Kershaw and Jim Sheehan, who took me on tours of German history. Finally, André Béteille, Ester Goody, Peter Burke, Maurice Godelier, Rudolf Braun, and others contributed to a seminar on history and anthropology, which supplied some theoretical perspective to the events surrounding us all. To them and to everyone who makes the Wissenschaftskolleg possible, I give my thanks for one of the most stimulating years of my life.

I cannot close without mentioning the East-West Seminar in Eighteenth-Century Studies, which I conducted at the Kolleg with the help of Wolf Lepenies in September, 1989. It was an extraordinary event— one of the first times that a group of younger scholars from all disciplines in Eastern Europe and the West gathered for intensive sessions of shop talk in Berlin. By now it seems normal for East and West to come together. In September, 1989, it looked like a bold experiment. The experiment proved to be a great success, thanks to the support of the Kolleg and its indefatigable Rektor.