

Interview: A Brief Conversation with Robert Darnton

DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.7440/histcrit54.2014.11](https://doi.org/10.7440/histcrit54.2014.11)

Renán Silva

Profesor del Departamento de Historia de la Universidad de los Andes (Colombia). Doctor en Historia por la Universidad de París I, Panthéon-Sorbonne (Francia). rj.silva33@uniandes.edu.co

Attempting to introduce such an outstanding and visible figure as Robert Darnton —current director of the Harvard University Library, long-time professor in the History Department at Princeton University, a great connoisseur of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* Archives and of the prolongations of its history in the National Archives of France, and, finally, an informed and equanimous polemicist who has long written in the *New York Review of Books*— to an audience of historians or a cultivated academic public is a pointless endeavor.

Robert Darnton is well known as a great historian and a notable writer, a reputation he has merited throughout his career, from *The Business of Enlightenment* [1987], his astonishing book on the Enlightenment as the great business that marked the beginning of the modern publishing industry, to his recent *Poetry and the Police* [2010], where the author explores communication networks in 18th-century Paris, and which has already been translated into Spanish. His writing career includes two masterful syntheses on cultural history and the history of books: *The Kiss of Lamourette* [1990 in English and 2010 in Spanish] and *The Case for Books* [2009 in English and 2010 in Spanish]. Darnton is always an impeccable writer who treats language with dignity, makes no concessions to university jargon, and remains loyal to the idea that thinking means neither to speak nor think awkwardly. Nor does it imply renouncing one's sense of humor and the repeated use of irony, but rather affirming one's self in the idea of communicating, teaching, and learning.

As a historian of culture, books, and communication, Robert Darnton stands out for his knowledge of and fidelity to the basic rules of the historian's trade, his deep understanding of archives, on the basis of which he constructs his research problems, and for his attention to the present and to what we can glimpse of the future in it. All of these qualities enable his studies on books and the circulation of information in the 18th century to immediately

connect the reader with the current world of Google, the Internet, virtual universes, “information highways,” the future fate of libraries and, above all, what he calls “research libraries” —something which all university libraries are, or should be.

In anticipation of Robert Darnton’s visit to Los Andes University next November, *Historia Crítica* has taken advantage of this opportunity to ask the renowned historian some significant questions in the fields of cultural history, the history of books, and his own historical studies.

Renán Silva [RS]: *Professor Darnton, will 18th-century French society continue to be, in its cultural and political dimensions, your field of observation in the coming years?*

Having spent so much of my life in the eighteenth century, I feel happy and at home there. People often ask me whether I actually would have preferred to live in 18th-century France, the supreme era, according to Talleyrand, of “*la douceur de vivre*.” My answer is a qualified yes. If you, as a learned Professor in Bogotá, possessed the secret of magical realism and could wave a wand over me, I would gladly be transported to Paris in the year 1750. However, I would insist on two conditions: place me well above the working class and the peasantry; and no toothache, please. I run across toothaches and other afflictions whenever I immerse myself in the archives. They remind me that the human condition was painful in the past, far more so than after the invention of aspirin, antibiotics, and other marvels of modern science. I know from long study that people often went hungry in early modern Europe. 250 of every 1,000 babies died before their first birthday. After the bubonic plague ceased to decimate the population in 1721, small pox took over, then cholera, then... to list the misery inflicted on humanity would turn our conversation into a lament. So I would answer that I love the wit, the naughtiness, the *joie de vivre* that I encounter in documents from the eighteenth century, but I have no illusions about the harshness of life for most human beings in most eras of the past.

RS: *Is there any exemplary, “typical,” or particularly significant element in that period of French cultural history which you have been exploring for so many years? Have you ever been tempted to delve into that same period in the history of the United States?*

In my most recent book, *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature*, I wandered far outside 18th-century France and spent most of my time in 19th-century British India and 20th-century Communist East Germany. French history is particularly inviting, because the archives are so rich and the historiography is so fascinating. But the issues that have

intrigued me —publishing and the book trade, the circulation of ideas, the development of public opinion, the sociology of literature, collective attitudes or “mentalities”— exist in other times and places, including the United States. I’m sure you have a lot to say about them in Colombia.

RS: *In that small jewel of historical analysis and irony entitled “Seven Bad Reasons Not to Study Manuscripts” [Harvard Library Bulletin, 1993-1994] you suggest an opposition between libraries and archives, and offer a sharp critique of works of history that limit themselves to secondary sources and of the corresponding theoretical inflation, recalling the way in which new, well-employed documentation enriches our knowledge of the past. Is such a critique still as timeless as it was twenty years ago? Does historical analysis, in the United States at least, return to the old classic canons that recommend us to visit archives and work with primary sources?*

I am delighted to learn that you have read “Seven Bad Reasons Not to Study Manuscripts,” an essay that I feared had been forgotten. I think its main point is still valid: history flourishes when historians dig deep into original sources, and it degenerates when they merely rework material that they found in secondary sources. History needs to be constantly replenished by new material extracted from the archives. By exposure to manuscript sources, historians maximize the possibility of discoveries, and they usually find them when they were not looking for them. Much of my work has resulted from coming across documents that opened up one subject while I was studying another. Archives are endless —the *Archives Nationales de France* contain hundreds of thousands of boxes that no one has ever opened— and they are endlessly rich. The advent of the Internet does not mean that archival research is outdated but rather that it can be supplemented by new methods and sources. Digitization can bring manuscripts within the range of researchers who cannot jump on a plane to Paris or Berlin or Calcutta. Technology also opens up new possibilities: data mining, word searches, the pursuit of material through hyperlinks, the use of multimedia. The new information age is making old information accessible, but it is not making archives obsolescent.

RS: *Let us go for a moment to The Case for Books. Past, Present and Future which in Spanish has a subtitle that I like very much: Futuro, Presente y Pasado. In a climate of apocalyptic interpretations regarding the future of books and horror stories about the control of society by those who control information, your serene voice has tried to introduce some order into the debate and to avoid unnuanced analyses, but without neglecting to warn us of the possible dangers on the horizon. Professor Darnton, after your texts on The Case for Books, what do you foresee as the evolution of the “new Alexandria” built by Google?*

In 2004, Google set out to digitize all the books in the world. It aimed to create a search service so that users could enter an item in an electronic window and then find where that item occurred in a book. Snippets or small selections of text would then appear on their computer screens along with references to the book. It was a great idea. But Google's digitizing soon carried it into the domain of books covered by copyright. It was sued by the rights holders, and after three years of secret negotiations, the parties agreed on a "settlement." The settlement transformed Google's search service into a commercial library. Research libraries that had originally provided the books, free of charge, to Google were now being asked to buy back access to their own books, in digitized form, by purchasing subscriptions to Google's data base. The price of the subscriptions could escalate as disastrously as the price for academic periodicals. Along with other heads of libraries, I protested against Google Book Search, as the project was called. I thought it represented a monopoly of a new kind, a monopoly of access to knowledge stored in electronic data bases. Fortunately, a federal court, which had to approve the settlement, declared it a violation of the Sherman anti-trust act. Therefore, Google Book Search is dead. We are now replacing it with a slightly similar project, the Digital Public Library of America or DPLA. The DPLA will make digitized collections in research libraries available to everyone, free of charge, at one click on a computer. But it will not include copyrighted books —unless, as I hope, copyright laws can be modified so as to leave room for non-commercial purposes. Modern technology makes it possible to democratize access to knowledge, but we must guard against the ever-present danger that commercial interests will take over the modes of electronic communication.