

Tactics as the Art of the Weak: Michel de Certeau on Latin America¹

Although Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) did not write very much about Latin America, his cultural study perspective addressed the subtle ways in which ordinary people resist systems from within. For this reason, his insights, like the insights of the more concrete James Scott,² may be applied to Latin America. Unlike Scott, who uses anthropological behavior as the basis for his analysis, de Certeau is much less tangible, since his theories derive from linguistic studies, particularly Wittgenstein's model of ordinary language and what de Certeau refers to as the speech act. This happens when speakers make use of language in ways fitting personal needs. De Certeau applies this behavior to his study of culture, and therefore to the practice of everyday life, the title, in fact, of the English translation of his most wide-known work.³ Individual action, he claims, is never totally reducible to the structures in which it occurs. De Certeau challenges more traditional historical approaches, claiming that they tend to isolate, and to immobilize their object of study.

De Certeau, in fact, influenced the evolution of a historiographical approach known as "spatial history." As practiced by cultural geographers, social anthropologists, literary critics and others, spatial history focusses on modes of reality as revealed especially in places of public assembly--from amusement parks to international expositions to museums and shopping malls. Foucault called them as a class "heterotopes," part of the larger landscape of urban spaces and "natural" landscapes which we inhabit.⁴

Ordinary people trespass on these spaces, which since the nineteenth century are places for consumption, the defining activity of modern life.⁵ In 1851, the first great world exhibition was held in London, the prototype of all world's fairs and the source of modern patterns of consumption in the industrial nations as well as the first widespread use of advertising to encourage consumption among ordinary citizens. This concept did not originate with de Certeau: Karl Marx was the first major social theorist to argue that capital created a world in its own image, one that "glorified profit, greed, competition, and exploitation."⁶ But de Certeau has taken this concept in new directions, exploring commodity semiotics in search for those moments when dominant strategies fail and resistance rises. To de Certeau, all consumer tactics automatically occur at the margin of society.⁷

De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), in fact, is dedicated to "l'homme ordinaire," the ordinary man, for the author, a hero. This man is a silent master of everyday experience because he does not interpret or translate his experience as "experts" in history, sociology, or anthropology do; he creates his own text (or poem) as he goes along. Unreadability and invisibility are the key to what makes the everyday the everyday.⁸ The hero is a *flaneur*, a subject of "walkabout sensibility," in that act exercising resistance and producing urban space to his own taste. Even in hostile environments, the *flaneur* still strolls.⁹ De Certeau believes that history writing, like all writing, constructs the reality it purports to represent.¹⁰ The historian is mistaken, he posits, in believing that the everyday can be summarized by an inventory of things, what Braudel called "a weighing of the world,"¹¹ or perhaps what Clifford Geertz calls "thick description." Rather, the very weakness of ordinary man's lot, de Certeau asserts, is his strength.

De Certeau and his fellow cultural historians decry modern patterns of consumption and seek evidence for occurrences of resistance, in which subjects undermine the imposed relations of power.¹² De Certeau is constantly aware of the pressures created by the dominant cultural economy for its products to be consumed (that is, socially recognized). His conjecture rests on the idea that ordinary people extract ways of resisting from the products and goods that they acquire each day as consumers—items as mundane as newspapers, television programs, and groceries. They cannot escape the dominant cultural economy, but they can adapt it to their own ends. Discipline, he asserts, is constantly deflected and resisted by those who are caught in its "nets," and that their "dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity" constitutes an "antidiscipline" which Foucault's analysis ignores.¹³

De Certeau calls this *la perruque* (the wig), an act in which the employee does things for him or herself while ostensibly working for the boss—writing a love letter on the job, for example, or using the company's tools to make something to take home. These acts persist despite measure taken to repress them. On a larger scale, de Certeau cites the example of resistance on the part of the indigenous peoples of the New World subverting the dominant Spanish colonial system by eluding norms of exchange and behavior. He also praises students and intellectuals living under government repression who subvert required texts by *poaching*, resisting by posing different interpretations from the official ones. Many scholars have been taken by this notion, since it gives license to bold leaps of the imagination. Henry Jenkins, for example, uses de Certeau's notion of "textual poaching" to demonstrate how the canonical texts of Star Trek are revised and re-envisioned by Trekkies.¹⁴ Folk literature, de Certeau adds, is also a form of resistance, considering the fact that the unfortunate often

come out on top in tales and legends, and as they do in Brazilian Carnival and its rituals of social and status inversion. Power relations are present at all levels, de Certeau contends, and as such they can be manipulated in self-defense even at the bottom of the social ladder.

All of this only skims the surface of de Certeau's theories, which are erudite and opaque. De Certeau has written that a history that loses the dimension of time is no history at all, but he rarely deals with time-rooted historical issues.¹⁵ He sidesteps periodizing different types of tactics, for example, whether the tactics are pre-modern, modern, or post-modern.¹⁶ When his arguments are examined carefully in the light of specific social experience, though, they often seem banal if not thin and superficial.¹⁷ What new is he telling us when he celebrates resistance? Everyone knows how dense official censors are—on the day that tanks rolled into Rio de Janeiro on April 1, 1964, the *Jornal do Brasil* registered its disgust at the military coup by running a weather report which stated that the country was being swept by malevolent winds, and that the temperature in Brasília was rapidly rising. A few years later, composer and performer Chico Buarque de Holanda mocked the armed forces by using words with double meanings in his seemingly nostalgic song, *A Banda*. This practice is as old as the hills, and not at all surprising. Art historian Carol Damian, for example, has offered evidence that Indian and mestizo artists interjected indigenous religious motifs into their paintings of Roman Catholic iconography.¹⁸ What is new here?

De Certeau's critical theory gets lost in its own language. He offers a model of the "modalities of pedestrian enunciation" (p. 99), the point being that the administrative abstraction of "the city" in

a street map "captures neither the limitless diversity of pedestrian behavior nor the existential maps of individual actors."¹⁹ To say that street names evoke personal memories, he says that "(A) rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning" (p. 105). Sounds impressive, but what exactly is he saying?

Perhaps the most relevant assertion for Latin America that de Certeau makes is his contention that there are limits to the extent to which actors are wholly dominated by or integrated into centralized systems of control. Even this, however, runs the risk of oversimplification. The tragedy that resulted when rural peasants trekked from their homes to Antônio Conselheiro's New Jerusalem at Canudos to await the coming of the millennium, only to be provoked by government troops and ultimately massacred, shows what centralized systems of control do when they are made aware of acts of popular resistance, however peaceful and innocuous they may be. The savage repression that followed the coup against Salvador Allende (1973) is another example of the extent to which authoritarian and totalitarian governments can overpower overwhelmingly. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina, embarrassed the military dictatorship by their courageous acts of civil disobedience but their actions did nothing to bring back the lives of their children—even though becoming the focus of the international media helped in fact bring down the military regime.

At the start of the second chapter of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau reminisces about his visit to Salvador in Bahia to attend a seminar on the popular culture of Northeast Brazil.

Recalling the sounds of night, the theatricality of the buildings, the "vague murmurings and human voices," he codes architecture and place by color: the "blue" and "open" Church do Rosário; the "dark stone" of the Igreja do Passo. Passing faces multiply "indecipherable and nearby secret(s)."²⁰ De Certeau disdained empirical history because he felt that it was motivated by a fear of the instability of language²¹, but what he seems to substitute are the banal impressions of a tourist. Of the Igreja do Passo, he writes, imperiously: "It dominates the Ladeira do Passo. It does not yield itself to researches (sic.) who nevertheless have it there before them, just as popular language escapes them, when they approach it, for it comes from too far away and too high."²² This pontification mocks the legions of historians who have devoted their lives to reconstructing the past, implying that historians remain deaf to popular language and "the dust and sweat of the city."

It is telling that when de Certeau wrote about Brazil he didn't bother to get his facts straight. His curious geography located "Crato, Juazeiro, Itapetim, etc." in "the Pernambuco," in which they are not, and bestowed on the northeastern state a title applied during the nineteenth century by Englishmen to Argentina. Exaggeratingly endorsing politically-correct causes, he wrote about the "great deeds of Frei Damião, the charismatic hero of the region...constantly qualified by the successive accounts of the celestial punishments visited upon his enemies."²³ De Certeau then turned to what he calls the stratifying partition of socio-economic space, organized by the "immemorial struggle between 'the powerful' and 'the poor,' the field of constant victories by the rich and the police, and also as the reign of mendacity. There no truth is said, he argues, except in whispers and

among peasants: *Agora a gente sabe, nas não pode dizer alto* ("Now people know what is going on but they can't talk about it out loud"). He concluded:

"In this space, the strong always win and words always deceive experience in accord with that of a Maghrebian syndicalist in Billancourt [a Renault factory outside of Paris]: 'They always fuck us over.'"²⁴

De Certeau's implicit assertion of the division between the everyday (located "down below") and the visible power structure that imposes itself from above seems a social division reminiscent of the Marxist Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre, however, finds everyday people victims, forced into silence, and "manipulated in ways...damaging to their spaces and their daily life."²⁵ De Certeau searches for what the ordinary man invents in his routine, but to what extent this liberates and raises the quality of life remains to be seen. His major hypothesis is that behaving within imposed systems constitutes resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and dogmatic limitations because practicing order constituted by others redistributes its space."²⁶ Groups and individuals caught in the net of discipline do find refuge in tactics that draw on "dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity,"²⁷ but to what degree do these tactics produce meaningful relief for the oppressed?

A serious problem with theories like de Certeau's that find heroic behavior in the daily lives of ordinary people, then, is not that individual acts of defiance and resistance lack praiseworthiness but that finding satisfaction in small daily acts of defiance and coping overlooks, for those dedicated

to meaningful social change, the larger and bleaker picture. This includes the consequences of generations of exploitation, of the social acceptance of widening gaps between haves and have nots, of the insidious legacy of what Robert Mangabeira Unger terms the institution of "wage repression," that has trapped salaried workers in Latin America for generations. Can it be that oppressive social systems look the other way at workers who use their employer's telephone because they do not have one at home, or at field hands who steal ears of corn or tubers of manioc, exactly because they understand the need for such acts as safety valves? If Brazilian elites accept the inversion of social roles at Carnival because they only last a few days, and because they are essentially harmless, so what if peasants learn to strike back at the landowning class by refusing to make eye contact, or by stealing some firewood, if the oppressive system survives intact? De Certeau, to be sure, best knew France, where workers were depoliticized. It is not so much that he was opposed to revolution as that he was looking for a praxis in a non-revolutionary time. De Certeau seems less relevant in more exploitative societies such as Brazil's.²⁸

It is curious that de Certeau, who devotes so much energy to studying the layered nuances of daily life, is gender blind. His subjects are male ("man" and "his" protest against domination) or gender-neutral, but he never recognizes the ways in which women resist.²⁹ After all, do not women hold unrecognized power in the family and in other spheres? Lionizing the underclass regardless of gender shrugs off the suffering. If the weak, as de Certeau claims, "continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them," then why does poverty and hardship in rural and urban Latin America increase? Is living in cardboard shacks under highway bridges an acceptable form of resistance even if it is a

"clever" example—de Certeau frequently uses the word "clever"-of appropriating objects from consumer culture? What is the point of acknowledging that the poor live "down below," below the thresholds at which visibility begins?

To be sure, de Certeau admits that tactical victories are fragile. The weak cannot keep what they win, but they are doomed to walk the earth in spaces appropriated by the dominant culture. There are, he argues, *polemological* spaces ("which perspicacious country people saw as a network of innumerable conflicts covered up with words") and *utopian* spaces ("in which a possibility, a definition miraculous in nature, was affirmed by religious stories").³⁰ Lucid discourse, he says, "turned up fake words and prohibitions on speaking in order to reveal an ubiquitous injustice...that of history."³¹ People make space habitable, like a rented apartment, but they must soon give it back and move on to other spaces. They must always be in the watch for opportunities that must be "seized on the wing."³²

NOTES:

1. I would like to thank Antol Rosenthal, Erica Windler, and Guido Ruggiero for their assistance with this topic.
2. cite Scott
3. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Tr. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
4. Kentaro Tomio, "Towards Spatial History": Michel de Certeau and the Practices of Everyday Life," paper presented at the American Historical Association, January 1997, New York.
5. See Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1971).
6. Tristan Mendoza, "Modernity, Commodification, and the Spectacle from Marx through Debord into the Postmodern," in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Adventure* (forthcoming), reproduced at <http://ccwf.cc.utexas.edu/~panicbuy/HaTeMail/marxtopomo.html>.
7. See Mark Poster, *Cultural History and Postmodernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 133.
8. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 11, 17, 21, 60, 141. See Michelle Chilcoat, "Walking Rhetorics," <http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/e-center/chilcoat.htm>.
9. Kentaro Tomio, "Towards 'Spatial History,'" 8, 10.
10. Mary K. Cayton, review of *Writing History*, in *Church History*, 62:3 (Sept. 1993), 454-455.
11. Chilcoat, 2.
12. Kentaro Tomio, 4.

13. Beryl Langer, review of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, *Contemporary Sociology*, 17 (1988), 123.
14. Henry Jenkins, cited in Early Critical Theory Approaches to Star Trek," http://www.clo.com/~rvk/past_res.htm#Textual Poacher.
15. See Joan Wallach Scott, "After History?", paper given at "History and the Limits of Interpretation: A Symposium," Rice University, Feb. 20. 1996, on <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~culture/papers/Scott.html>.
16. Mark Poster, *Cultural History*, 132-133.
17. See Meaghan Morris, "Banality in Cultural Studies," in *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
18. Carol Damian, xxx
19. Beryl Langer, *op. cit.*, 123. See also Bjorn Sorensen, "Spatial and Temporal Metaphors in Net Communication," <http://dpub36.pub.sbg.ac.at/ectp/sorens.htm>.
20. *Practice of Everyday Life*, 15-16.
21. Mark Poster, *Cultural History*, 116.
22. *Practice of Everyday Life*, 15.
23. *Practice of Everyday Life*, 16.
24. *Practice of Everyday Life*, 16.
25. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), cited by Michelle Chilcoat, 3.
26. See "Sleeping Beauty Awakes," http://crca-www.ucsd.edu/95_96/ASSOC/NomadWeb.html.
27. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xiv.
28. Courtesy of Mark Poster, University of California, Irvine and Steven C. Topik, UCI.

29. See Beryl Langer, *loc. cit.*

30. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 16.

31. *Practice of Everyday Life*, 16.

32. "Cultural and Narrative Tactics in Women's, Minority, Post-Colonial Literature," Society for the Study of Narrative Literature, 1996 MLA Session, Chicago, <http://www.wheatonma.edu/academic/academicdept/English/text/EnglishMLA.htm>.