A fourth critic of the Enlightenment: Michel de Certeau and the ethnography of subjectivity*

This paper examines the potential contribution of the work of Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) to anthropological theories of agency, resistance and subjectivity. It argues that de Certeau’s work shares with contemporary anthropological theory a legacy of the counter-Enlightenment that combines a profound pessimism about modern society with an emphasis on the redemptive possibility of populism, expressivism and pluralism. Whilst in anthropology these developed into a complex theorisation of agency, resistance and subjectivity as embedded in socio-cultural context, de Certeau appears to systematically avoid a coherent theory. Rather, he offers a theology of agency, resistance and subjectivity that sees resistance through ‘tactics’ as the manifestation of an enduring counter-modern human spirit, and as inherently morally good. The paper closes with a caution against anthropologists adopting a similar ‘theological’ stance towards resistance.

**Key words** De Certeau, tactics and strategies, resistance, structure and agency, subjectivity, counter-Enlightenment, anthropological theory

**Introduction**

Since the 1980s, Sherry Ortner has been examining anthropological theory through a series of articles that sum up trends, developments and problems with emergent theoretical trends in the discipline (see Ortner 1984, 1995, 2005). Central to her account is the problem – shared with social theory more broadly (Giddens 1979) – of the relationship between structures of constraint and forms of autonomy, agency, resistance within and against those structures. In 1984, she focused on the emergent theory of practice, which since the English translation of Bourdieu’s *Outline of a theory of practice* (1977), and Sahlin’s work on *Culture and practical reason* (1976) – refined in the context of early colonial Hawaii (Sahlins 1981, 1985) – presented a means of explaining the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call “the system,” on the other’ (Ortner 1984: 148).

By the 1990s, resistance had emerged as a key feature of the relationship between action and system, partly because of the influence of Foucault’s work on power, knowledge

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and resistance (1977, 1980), and partly because of James Scott’s eloquent elaboration of ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (1985). Together, the Foucault and Scott positions opened up the possibility – indeed the necessity – of seeing the operation of power in everyday practice, thereby ‘democratising’ resistance, rather than reserving it for explicit political or resistance movements. In this frame, such diverse activities as foot-dragging among Malaysian peasants (Scott 1985), the wearing of lingerie by Bedouin women (Abu-Lughod 1990) and the joining of new evangelical churches (Comaroff 1985) can be seen as forms of resistance. Although apparently well suited to anthropology – with its concern with the ethnographic unpicking of everyday life – Ortner (1995) argues that many anthropological studies of resistance are ethnographically ‘thin’ (p. 190); they tend to under-play the internal politics of subaltern groups and the complexity of motivations to resist, presenting social actors as if their sole significant action is resistance and thereby effectively preventing a fuller understanding of human subjectivity.

It was this concern with subjectivity to which Ortner returned in 2005, arguing that subjectivity is ‘the basis of “agency”, a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon. Agency is not some natural originary will; it takes shape as specific desires and intensions within a matrix of subjectivity – of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings’ (p. 34). As the basis of agency, subjectivity is also therefore the basis of resistance, and of the relationship between human action and ‘the system’. Whilst Foucault-inspired work has explored the way discourses construct political subjects – or subject positions – she argues, it falls short of examining subjectivity, conceived in Raymond Williams’ terms as ‘structure of feelings’ (p. 40); the complex of emotional and reflexive orientations to the world that are generated through people’s engagement with such discourses.

Ortner argues for a rehabilitation of the Geertzian framework of ‘culture’ to thicken our understanding of subjectivity, agency and resistance, pointing towards his ethnographic work on Bali (1973a, 1973b) as a model. Within that work, Geertz identifies the systems of public symbols that both represent the world to the Balinese and generate within them an orientation to that world – ‘models of’ and ‘models for’ the world. These symbolic systems – Ortner suggests we see them as discourses (2005: 37) – generate a particular orientation to the world, characterised by a general anxiety (lek in Balinese). Ortner links this anxious property of Balinese subjectivity backwards into Weber’s description of Calvinist anxiety in the Protestant ethic, which influenced Geertz’s thinking (1973c: 5), and forwards into Jameson’s (1984) and Sennett’s (1998) treatments of ‘post-modern’ subjectivity, noting – with some degree of approval – that ‘anxieties of interpretation and orientation are seen as part of the generic human condition, grounded in the human dependency on symbolic orders to function within the world’ (Ortner 2005: 40). As discourses, these symbolic orders are also orders of power, and Ortner is concerned both to understand subjectivity in its relation to power, but also forge a cultural critique of this process:

allowing us to ask sharp questions about the cultural shaping of subjectivities within a world of wildly unequal power relations, and about the complexities of personal subjectivities within such a world. (2005: 46)

As a set of keywords for contemporary anthropological theory, practice, resistance and subjectivity lead us almost inevitably to Michel de Certeau, whose work, particularly as summarised and exemplified in The practice of everyday life (1984), concerns precisely
the relationship between ‘the system’ and human action – or between strategy and tactics – that troubles Ortner. Given this correspondence of interest, and de Certeau’s enduring concern with the question of ‘the other’, it is somewhat surprising that anthropologists have not taken his writings on board with quite the same fervour as they have those of his compatriots Bourdieu and Foucault. This paper is concerned less to explain why this might be so, than to examine the kind of theory of practice, resistance and subjectivity de Certeau might offer anthropologists. De Certeau was explicitly critical of both Bourdieu and Foucault, along broadly the same lines as Ortner; that they view subjectivity as a reflex of broader structural processes – discourse, habitus – that determine subject position and generate action independently of the reflexive subject. Doing so evokes what de Certeau calls docta ignorantia – ‘a cleverness that does not recognise itself as such’ (1984: 56), but is at the centre of human cultural activity. But despite this criticism, de Certeau’s oeuvre falls some way short of generating a coherent competing theory of agency, resistance and subjectivity. Rather, it presents an account that is much better described as a theology than a theory – rooted as it is in a universalist and universalising notion of the human spirit.

This is different from, but shares some similarities with, Geertz’s account of a universally anxious subject. Whilst Geertz sees an inherent human anxiety about conceptual chaos as the driving force of symbolic activity (1973d: 99) which then generates a model of and a model for (p. 93) subjective being and action in the world, de Certeau sees action – and particularly the action of everyday resistance – as relatively autonomous from socially-derived subjectivity, and rooted in a much more fundamental human nature. Thus, where Ortner praises Geertz for his attention to socially-derived subjectivity, turning us away from a notion of agency as ‘originary will’, de Certeau seems to take us back there; agency and the capacity to resist seem to originate in the irreducible essence of the person – the human soul. To this extent, whilst Geertz proposes a social theory of subjectivity and social action, de Certeau gives us a theological one.

What de Certeau and Geertz do share is a legacy – if not a direct genealogy – from the ‘classical’ social theorists of the counter-Enlightenment, as discussed by Berlin (2000). What they – Vico, Hamann and Herder – developed was a framework for understanding human culture and society that was populist – focusing on and establishing the significance of everyday ‘folk’ culture – expressivist – focusing on the symbolic, the ‘poetic’, the expressive – and pluralist – encompassing an inherent relativism. As central elements in the development of the concept of culture (Kuper 2000), these features of counter-Enlightenment thought are arguably central to the anthropological endeavour, and Geertz’s particular take on it. He too is a relativist (Geertz 1984); his expansion of the Weberian focus on meaning generates an expressivist focus in which ‘man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun’ (Geertz 1973c: 5); and in his emphasis on locally situated systems of meaning (Geertz 1983) must likewise be termed a populist. So too de Certeau; but de Certeau also shares with the counter-Enlightenment thinkers a focus on the redemptive qualities of human action. For him, human action – and particularly the action of everyday resistance – is inherently liberating, and morally emancipating.

De Certeau’s programme – which might be described as a redemptive populism – must be seen in the context of an overall pessimism about modern society, modernist projects and modernity more generally. This he also shares with the counter-Enlightenment thinkers, making him, arguably, a fourth critic of the Enlightenment. I
will return to the implications of de Certeau’s project for an anthropology of subjectivity at the end of this article. For the moment, though, I will take his anti-modernist pessimism as a point of departure for exploring his work.

**Anti-modernism**

De Certeau’s intellectual work was inevitably coloured by his vocation. As a Jesuit and a historian, his view of Enlightenment and modernity were profoundly pessimistic. In his work on belief (de Certeau 1984: 177–89; 1990: 214–43) he links what he sees as a pervasive crisis of belief, of Church, of society and of modernity to the processes of Reformation and counter-Reformation, which critically transform the relationships between religion/Church and society/polity:

> It was in the eleventh and twelfth centuries that, under the sign of ‘The Peace of God’, ecclesiastical powers imposed their ‘order’ on civil powers in conflict. The following centuries show the deterioration of that order to the advantage of secular sovereigns. In the seventeenth century, the Churches receive their models and their rights from the monarchies, even if they still represent a ‘religiousness’ that legitimises the temporal powers and that temporal powers gradually transfer to their own account. With the breakdown of the ecclesiastical power over the past three centuries, beliefs have flowed back towards the political, but without bringing with them the divine or celestial values that the Churches had set aside, regulated, and taken up. (de Certeau 1984: 181–2)

Louis XIV, he tells us, as an apparently counter-Reformation king, is concerned less to re-establish the power of the Catholic Church than to place it in a position where it serves the interests of the burgeoning state power. Post-Reformation, ‘political institutions use religious institutions, infusing them with their own criteria, dominating them with their protection, aiming them towards their goals’ (de Certeau 1990: 156–7). What this sets in motion is the gradual withdrawal of belief – which de Certeau sees as not only synonymous with credulity (de Certeau 1984: 193) but also conviction – from both the religious sphere and the political. By the eighteenth century, and into the nineteenth, religious ideas become supplanted by those of Socialism, which like religion before acted as a counter-balance, to work against the established order of the secular state:

> There is vis-à-vis the established order, a relationship between the Churches that defended an other world and the parties of the left which, since the nineteenth century, have promoted a different future. (de Certeau 1984: 183)

Many of the Socialist movements of the nineteenth century have their origins in utopian religiosity – the Quakers and Shakers, for example, which provided models of theoretical and actually existing socialism for Marx and Engels (Desroche 1971: 293); the Mormons and Evangelicals, who inspired the Fabian movement of the later nineteenth century (MacKenzie and MacKenzie 1977). But in their oppositional stance vis-à-vis the state, these movements were vulnerable. Both the Churches and Socialism appealed to legitimisation by means of an ethical or theoretical truth because of their lack of actual power or legitimacy, and appear to de Certeau as moribund in the contemporary world. Belief, he argues, has become ‘polluted’, and the stock of
belief – once thought to be limitless – has begun to run out: ‘Believing is being exhausted’ (de Certeau 1984: 180). This is a predicament for both the oppositional institutions – the Churches, Socialism – and the state itself, which is maintaining power, but losing authority. As a consequence it proliferates the apparatuses of surveillance, creating more and more complex mechanisms for maintaining control – police, schools, health service, security – and demonstrating legitimacy – opinion polls, surveys, statistics. This is a false legitimacy, however, revealing not the strength of political authority, and of people’s belief in political authority, but its absence.

This pessimism is reminiscent of Foucault’s account of the panopticisation of modern society in *Discipline and punish* (1977). However, in de Certeau’s account, the apparatuses of surveillance are not so totalising as Foucault implies, and it is in the cracks between panoptic procedures that he sees hope for redemption:

> Beneath what one might call the ‘monotheistic’ privilege that panoptic apparatuses have won for themselves, a ‘polytheism’ of scattered practices survives, dominated but not erased by the triumphal success of one of their number. (de Certeau 1984: 48 – emphasis in original)

This presentation of hope that the scattered and surviving practices – what he calls tactics – might offer some purchase against the overarching strategies of modern social institutions is central to de Certeau’s redemptive account of everyday resistance. Against the totalising universalism of Foucault’s model of modernity he pits a more particularising theory of struggle against rationalisation – a counter-Enlightenment.

This much he shares – though in a different modality – with Berlin’s critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder. All three paint a similarly pessimistic picture of modernity, railing in their cases not against the mediatisation of conviction and panopticisation of authority but against the French *philosophes* – the new eighteenth and nineteenth century doctrines of universalism – the rise of the natural sciences and the emergence of the secular state as the new and rational means of administering populations. Berlin points to the contribution made by these three to a counter-stream that rails against the dominant Enlightenment philosophies, pitting against the scientistic rationalism and universalism a *populism*, a *pluralism* and an *expressivism* that generated, in the counter-Enlightenment a *redemptive populism* that saw people realising themselves and their potential – and therefore ultimately redeeming themselves – in the pursuit of popular culture; folk, or *volks* culture/*kultur*. This culture was essentially plural, relativistically organised such that each culture was equally valid, and with at its centre the expressive capacity of symbolic, metaphoric, expressive representation.

**Populism, expressivism, pluralism**

Against the elitism of the *philosophes*, the counter-Enlightenment thinkers presented a populism that concerned itself – like de Certeau – with a rehabilitation of folk ideas, or ideas that survive the rigours of modernity. These survivals are located in the particular linguistic and symbolic traditions – folk tales, mythologies – of particular societies, or cultures, which are seen as the repositories of their own potential salvation. This idea fed, through Hamann, into Romanticism, and through Herder into nationalism,
and combined popularism with pluralism. Both Hamann and, particularly, Herder emphasised the essential unity of different peoples, different cultures, but saw this as an organic and spontaneous feature of life as lived, rather than something to be enforced through technologies of governance:

[Herder] believed in kinship, social solidarity, "Volkstum", nationhood, but to the end of his life he detested and denounced every form of centralisation, coercion and conquest, which were embodied and symbolised both for him and for his teacher Hamann, in the accursed State. (Berlin 2000: 181)

Similarly, Vico was committed to this vision of populism and cultural plurality, using these notions to generate a historical methodology – *The new science* (1725) – that railed against the orthodoxies of the Enlightenment. He started from the proposition that rather than being static and eternal, the nature of humanity is constantly adaptive, and so constantly changing. Yet this change is not a telos – not the urgent pursuit of a single truth and Enlightenment, but rather a process that sees different historical epochs, different societies and cultures, having their own unique characteristics; an indispensability for the overall pattern of humanity, and above all their own validity. Where Descartes, for example, searched for a single and universal truth – *verum*, or verity – Vico suggests we examine human versions of truth – *certum*, or certainty: the socially-derived, relative truths or certainties that can be established in particular times and places, but not transcend those very human origins of truth.

Further to this, he argued that the makers of something are in a unique position to understand it – a principle of *per causas*, which is used to criticise the newly-emergent natural sciences. For Hamann, the natural sciences were blasphemous, because they presumed to attempt an explanation of that which God had made. For Vico, this was not only blasphemous, but impossible. As its creator, God alone could understand nature. Human society and culture, however, are the products of human activity, and so Vico saw them as uniquely explicable by humans:

in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, he alone knows: and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could come to know. (*The New Science* 331; in Berlin 2000: 46–7)

Therefore knowledge of the external world of nature differs not just by degree but *in kind* from knowledge of the ‘internal’ human world of culture and society, which humanity has created. We can know and understand knowledge of the external world – natural science – because that too is a human creation, but critically this knowledge does not correspond to the actuality of the external, natural world, which is created by God. Conversely, knowledge about the social world – the new science – does correspond to the actuality of the social world, because both are created by humans. Vico effectively inverts the Cartesian assumption that knowledge of the natural world is primary, and should act as a model for knowledge of the social world. In the new science, humanity
is not a subset of nature, but substantially different from it. Culture is the product of uniquely human activity, then, and requiring a uniquely human science.

Not only was culture seen as the product of human activity, this human activity was relativised such that each culture was seen to have a pervasive pattern which characterised it. This both Hamann and Herder linked to language in particular, but also to the symbolism inherent in popular or folk culture and literature. For Herder, the natural state of humanity is to live in nations, which are cultural/linguistic units, and distinct from, even opposed to states, as political units. Nations, as natural communities, were seen as the product of historical contingency, rather than an eternal spirit or essence – or even of race. Indeed, Herder was explicitly anti-racist, emphasising the plurality and equal validity of different peoples/cultures/volks and their specific modes of expression. There is no Favoritvolk; despite what German nationalists might have subsequently done with this appeal to the specificity of national culture.

For Vico, the particular pattern of another culture is intelligible to people from other cultures/societies/epochs because it is composed of features that are (at least potentially) shared across different societies; and are immanent in a human capacity for imaginative understanding: verstehen. This capacity enables us to understand what other people do or say in a way that is more profound than our understanding of nature:

It is almost, but not quite, impossible to work back from the present, think away society and civilisation, and imagine what it must have been like to be a primitive savage wandering in the ‘great forest of the earth’, scarcely able to communicate, with a vocabulary of gestures or pictures much smaller even than that of our modern child. We cannot hope to recover it all . . . Yet . . . history has, after all, been made by men, and therefore in the end it must always be penetrable by other men, as that which is not made by men – rocks, trees and animals – is not. (Berlin 2000: 49–50)

Human creations – artefacts and institutions, but particularly myths, fables – are the product of human relations with each other, and with God; they are neither the arbitrary/worthless objects of entertainment; nor absurd fantasies; nor the creations of unscrupulous rulers to control the minds of the populace. They are the product of human attempts to impose order on the world and make it intelligible, and should be treated as such rather than dismissed. Symbols and symbolism are neither gratuitous nor erroneous. Rather they are the manifestation of what Vico calls poetics: the metaphorical modes of expression used by the relatively unsophisticated masses: what the German philosophers would call ‘folk’ (and de Certeau the ‘popular’). Reading this poetics gives us a genuine window into how these ‘others’ think and understand their world.

For Vico, it is possible to generate understanding across different poetic systems because of a shared human ‘common sense’ (Berlin 2000: 82), or ‘common mental language’ (Hobbs 2002: 77). This language is determined by the possible range of human experience, and serves as a universal framework upon which particular cultural poetics are built – guaranteeing common roots for the global variety of cultural expressions. From this emerges a philological and etymological impetus to trace the varieties of human expression back to their common origins. This procedure constitutes the essence of cultural relativism. Understanding ‘other’ people is to see the world from their point of view, and to understand that their point of view derives from the same
common sense as ‘ours’. Doing so requires an understanding of what language, art, ritual means in particular contexts – taking on board popular culture as a set of meaningful representations that might from the outside seem credulous, superstitious, irrational, but from the inside ‘make sense’, and give us an entrée into the fundamentals of what ‘others’ think:

...from words and the way they are used we can infer the mental processes, the attitudes and outlooks of their users, for ‘minds are formed by the character of language, not language by the minds of those who speak it’... men are born into traditions of speech and writing which form minds as much as minds form them. (Berlin 2000: 62–3)

Thus, although culture is united by common sense, it is also plural – for if language forms the minds of its users, and languages are plural, then so too must be modes of thought it generates. This argument generates a kind of Wittgensteinian or Whorfian relativism that privileges language, as the ‘first and last organ and criterion of reason’ (Berlin 2000: 316, citing Hamann). Entering into different linguistic worlds, then, is also entering into different worlds of reason. This is made possible through what Vico describes as a new methodology for the new science – a process of reconstructive imagination or fantasia (Verene 1981: 204).

This combination of populism, expressivism and pluralism clearly influenced the development of the concept of culture (Kuper 2000). Through that, it has influenced anthropology, particularly in its North American interpretive manifestation – which Ortner sees as central to a rehabilitated anthropology of subjectivity. As noted above, Geertz is explicit about his debt to Weber’s verstehen methodology, but his notion of ‘thick description’ as a constructive process – fiction in the sense of ‘something made’, ‘something fashioned’ (1973c: 15) – is also reminiscent of Vico’s fantasia (Schneider 1987: 830). Herzfeld (1987) establishes a more explicit link between contemporary anthropology and Vico’s work, demonstrating the potency of Vico’s poetics for a critical and reflexive anthropological project that can unsettle the authority of both anthropology itself and romantic nationalism – particularly in Greece. The key to this reflexive critique is the shared origin of anthropology and nationalism in counter-Enlightenment thinking. Employing Vico’s etymological method can reveal this shared origin, undermining the legitimacy of the rhetorical strategies upon which they are both based, and thereby destabilising the entrenched prejudices they reproduce – nationalistic chauvinism and Eurocentrism (Herzfeld 2002: 910).

**A fourth critic of the Enlightenment**

It is more difficult to establish a direct genealogy of de Certeau’s work to that of Berlin’s three critics than it is for anthropology. Nevertheless, the key features of populism, expressivism and pluralism are abundantly present in his work. As outlined above, his critique begins with a critique of the state. His writing is filled with images of pollution, decay and even a kind of epidemiology of stately excess, considered as overly centralising, homogenising and, critically, militating against difference:

The exceptional, indeed cancerous, development of panoptic procedures seems to be indissociable from the historical role to which they have been assigned, that of
being a weapon to be used in combating and controlling heterogeneous practices. (de Certeau 1984: 48)

In administrations, offices, and even in political and religious groups a cancerous growth of the apparatus is the consequence of the evaporation of convictions, and this cancer becomes in turn the cause of a new evaporation of believing. (1984: 179–80)

This substitution of procedure for conviction erodes both pluralism and religion. De Certeau’s critique therefore reproduces the argument that humans’ natural state is in plurality; and that modernity – particularly the procedures of science and the state – is a threat to God. Homogenisation is rooted not only in panopticism, however, but also in inscription – in what de Certeau calls the ‘scriptural economy’ of the modern world. This economy is at the centre of the natural sciences, but also – importantly – of the human sciences. For de Certeau, the two are co-present, and operate by the same logic. Although he does not explicitly criticise the natural sciences, in the way that Vico had done in his New Science, implicit in his argument is a critique of the dehumanising principle behind scientific method. The anthropological or ethnological sciences are as problematic as the natural in this respect. In his work on travel writing, for example – in The writing of history (1988) – de Certeau takes to task European representations of indigenous South American societies arguing, like Said in Orientalism (1978), that they generate a homeostatised and essentialised version of what is a fundamentally plural – and oral – situation. Moreover, and consequently, they project European ideas about the other, rather than the ‘true’ nature of the other itself; distancing the writer – and therefore reader – from the oral societies they represent. In Vico’s terms, the pursuit of ethnological verum sacrifices the ethnographic actuality of certum.

The method of the scriptural economy is seen by de Certeau – again in common with Vico – as a fundamentally human practice; an ordering or ‘cutting’ and ‘cleaning-up’ of the messy reality of everyday life. De Certeau wishes to tidy up the cutting room floor, and recover what he sees as the lost voices of orality – lost in the ethnographic and historical record:

I am trying to hear these fragile ways in which the body makes itself heard in the language, the multiple voices set aside by the triumphal conquista of the economy that has, since the beginning of the ‘modern age’ (i.e., since the C17th or C18th), given itself the name of writing . . . The installation of the scriptural apparatus of modern ‘discipline’, a process that is inseparable from the ‘reproduction’ made possible by the development of printing, was accompanied by a double isolation from the ‘people’ (in opposition to the ‘bourgeoisie’) and from the ‘voice’ (in opposition to the written). (de Certeau 1984: 131–2)

Just as the voice of the people is lost in the scientific practices of inscription, so too is it lost in the transformation of politics from genuine conviction to the traces of conviction – in opinion polls, vox populi etc. For de Certeau, all roads lead to pollution – to the cancer of bureaucratic rationality. And yet, within de Certeau’s ideas, as with those other three critics of the Enlightenment, there is hope for redemption, in populism, expressivism and pluralism.
Towards redemption

De Certeau’s redemptive populism stems from his wish to recover the voices lost to normal scientific method in the scriptural economy. These voices are both historical and contemporary. Trained as a historian, de Certeau’s empirical work is historical; his work on contemporary society being more theoretical. Although both share a concern with recovering lost voices, it is in his empirical historical work that we see a method in operation. The clearest example comes from his work on The possession at Loudun (2000), which examines the events around – and representations of – the possession of a group of Ursuline nuns in the French town of Loudun in the early seventeenth century. The Loudun possession became a celebrated example of a more widespread phenomenon of the times – which is part of the reason why de Certeau chose to explore it.

De Certeau’s account of the possession at Loudun demonstrates how the past always acquires meaning through its rendering in the present; an approach that mirrors both Vico’s fantasia and Geertz’s thick description. His history, then, is not merely a history of what happened in Loudun in 1632, but also of the histories that have been written about it since, and indeed of his own historical method (Weymans 2004: 166). For Weymans, the very form of the volume The possession at Loudun performs the argument that de Certeau wishes to make about historiography: that it is impossible to tell just one story about Loudun, or indeed any historical process. The message is communicated not only through the content of the text, but also its form. The original French edition (1970) maintained a strict typographical distinction between passages drawn from archival sources – printed in roman – and the explanations of the historian – which are printed in italics. This technique draws further attention to the plurality of historical accounts and the role of the historian in synthesising them. As Weymans confirms:

Precisely because the sources are simply presented without immediate interpretation, it becomes clear just how far from ‘obvious’ they can be. They often contradict each other, sometimes they are broken off, and frequently they raise questions. Only by confronting these unruly source materials with the contemporary historian’s attempt to understand them can the absent past becomes visible. (2004: 166)

The presentation of documentary plurality mirrors the turbulent political and epistemological transformations of the day. Loudun in 1632 had been ravaged by the religious wars, and by plague; but as plague subsided, the sisters of the local Ursuline convent began to hear voices, feel presences and to laugh involuntarily. Some had convulsions, and on 1 October 1632 the devil was declared responsible. Exorcisms were performed, and the priest Urbain Grandier, father confessor of the convent, was accused of a devilish pact to bring possession to the sisters. Just as the exorcists became preoccupied with the sisters and their symptoms, so too did physicians, who were brought in as experts. Part of the drama in The possession at Loudun is the battle between exorcists and physicians for legitimacy of expertise over distributing diagnoses and cures for the sisters’ afflictions. Another element is the viewpoint of Grandier, whose refusal to confess, and whose letters to his mother while incarcerated became the source of further versions of the singular event. Grandier also became the object of
political debate. When his death sentence was publicised, pamphlets were distributed in his support, revealing conflicts between different religious sects, and between local and centralised authorities.

*The possession at Loudun* rehearses in textual form a method that writes against the totalising, synthesising method of the scriptural economy. It rails against the suggestion of pursuing a single, universalistic method, in favour of an eclectic approach to the multiplicity of possible voices, hidden yet recoverable from the historical record:

> These voices can no longer be heard except within the interior of the scriptural systems where they recur. They move about, like dancers, passing lightly through the field of the other. (de Certeau 1984: 131)

Despite his best efforts to generate a new kind of history that reclaims the lost voices, *The possession of Loudun* is still recognisably part of the scriptural economy – part of de Certeau’s own career trajectory from Paris to the University of California in San Diego. It is an – admittance early – example of the ‘new’ cultural microhistory (Hunt 1989), influenced by, or in this case arguably developing, the critique of representation brought about by the postmodern turn. A more radical form of rescripting, however, comes from his suggestion to write different kinds of text; what he calls *perruque* (wig) texts, that operate as counter forms to the scriptural economy.

De Certeau’s notion of *la perruque* is developed in *The practice of everyday life* (1984) in the context of his theorisation of resistance, which reconﬁgures the ‘system/action’ dialectic as two opposing forces: strategies and tactics. Strategies are the actions of the powerful, deriving from and oriented towards the realisation of abstract models (de Certeau 1984: 29). They emerge where an institution – a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution – separates itself from its environment to establish a panoptic position. This is what de Certeau describes as a Cartesian attitude; it is also ‘the typical attitude of modern science, politics, and military strategy’ (1984: 36). Strategies establish as ‘other’ that which they survey, so that their effects – politics, economics, science and technology – eschew the uncertainties and complexities of everyday life. Tactics, on the other hand, are the arts of the weak (1984: 37); of the ‘other’. They take place within the discursive space offered by strategies and because of that are not in a position to establish their own strategies. Rather, they are opportunistic and spontaneous – the product of contingency rather than design. It is in tactics that de Certeau offers hope of redemption from the overbearing panopticism of modern society. They rail against the strategies of the powerful, creating space of and for the ‘other’. *La perruque* is a particular form of resistive tactic based upon the appropriation of time.

De Certeau uses *la perruque* as a metaphor for both the counter-strategies of everyday tactics and the potential counter-inscriptions of work, such as his own, that redeems the ‘uncertainties of history’ (1984: 36) from the over-generalisations of the scriptural economy.

Strictly defined, *la perruque* is the practice – or tactic – of a worker appropriating company time by doing their own work disguised as that of their employer. Significantly, it is not straightforward stealing from the employer, but a form of tactical resistance that borrows company time, to make of it what the worker wishes – a family or social telephone call; a piece of work for the home etc. As a metaphor it describes a host of tactical resistances – all the way from the misappropriation of time in the French factory, to the more anthropologically familiar processes of ‘appropriation’, ‘mimesis’

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and ‘resistance’ seen in colonial contexts; where the culture and representations of the relatively powerful are taken on by the relatively powerless and turned against them:

More generally, a way of using imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for manoevers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference. That is where the opacity of a ‘popular’ culture could be said to manifest itself – a dark rock that resists all assimilation. (de Certeau 1984: 18)

Such resistances – practices of what de Certeau calls ‘popular culture’ – are emancipatory. They can be used to genuine effect against the order of power, and are widespread:

Many other examples would show the constant presence of these practices in the most ordered sphere of modern life. With variations, practices analogous to *la perruque* are proliferating in governmental and commercial offices as well as in factories. (de Certeau 1984: 26)

Beneath what one might call the ‘monotheistic’ privilege that panoptic apparatuses have won for themselves, a ‘polytheism’ of scattered practices survives, dominated but not erased by the triumphal success of one of their number. (1984: 48 – emphasis in original)

As symbolic expressive forms, these acts of *perruque* are distinct from the symbolic, linguistic phenomena of Vico’s or Herder’s redemptive cultural project, or indeed that of Geertz. Rather than cultural symbolic or linguistic *systems*, de Certeau appears to see them more as speech acts – tactical deployments of symbolism. They lie somewhere at the interstices of the relationship between the power/constraint of the modernist, Enlightenment project and the autonomy of the counter-Enlightenment; though their precise location is elusive in de Certeau’s writing. He eschews a coherent theory of tactics, choosing instead to maintain a textual performance of the indeterminacy of tactical practices. A kind of *perruque* of the *perruque*.

One place where he does locate these tactics or resistances is in the stylistic subversions of the migrant body:

A North African living in Paris or Roubaix . . . insinuates *into* the system imposed on him by the construction of a low-income housing development or of the French language the ways of ‘dwelling’ (in a house or language) peculiar to his native Kabylia. He superimposes them and, by that combination, creates for himself a space in which he can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation. (de Certeau 1984: 30)

As an evocative *description* of the everyday and bodily forms of resistance open to the modern subject, de Certeau is difficult to criticise. However, he never really offers an
explanation of tactics that would satisfy social anthropologists. The critical question is: where does this capacity to subvert – to generate the *perruque* and appropriate the technologies of the dominant order – come from?

De Certeau appears to celebrate his unwillingness to give a coherent answer to this question; and it is this that sets him aside – and why he sets himself aside – from Foucault and Bourdieu. His use of the example of the Kabyle migrant is surely not incidental in this regard. Bourdieu’s *Outline of a theory of practice* (1977) is based on fieldwork in Kabylia. De Certeau refuses to outline a theory of practice, rather letting a description of practice stand for itself. For Bourdieu, however, practice is accounted for through his concept of *habitus*:

systems of durable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, the principle of generation and structuration of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goal without presupposing the conscious orientation towards ends and the expressive mastery of operations necessary to attain them and, being all that, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organising action of a conductor. (Bourdieu 1977: 73)

Bourdieu’s aim was to construct a non-deterministic sociology that accounted for a mediation of on the one hand social structure and on the other hand modes of individual agency or instrumental rationality. *Habitus* describes the central mechanism of this dialectical process, which generates dispositions to act in a particular way. De Certeau’s critique of Bourdieu hangs on the issue of subjectivity – whether or not it accounts for subjects’ conscious pursuit of tactical options. For de Certeau, it does not. Rather, *habitus* presents a determining force that shapes peoples’ action without their being aware of it – a *docta ignorantia* (de Certeau 1984: 56) that drives practice without the subject’s awareness. In the example of the Parisian Kabyle, then, *habitus* would determine an enduring commitment to Kabyle ways of dwelling. For de Certeau, though, this commitment is a successful tactic through which the Kabyle migrant will appropriate the linguistic and housing strategies of the French state and creatively generate a space to live within it.

Elegant though this reformulation might seem, it still fails to answer two significant questions. First, in the absence of *habitus* or some other determinant feature, how does the migrant Kabyle know what are the ways of dwelling peculiar to his native Kabylia? Second, in the absence of a generative principle – such as *habitus* – which produces action, where does the capacity to subvert – to generate *la perruque* and appropriate the technologies of the dominant order – come from? In short, how do we account for agency, and how do we account for its meaningfulness?

Despite his criticisms of Bourdieu’s sophisticated theory, in the case of the Kabyle migrant, de Certeau appears to fall back on a rather simplistic kind of cultural determinism in which Kabyle ways of dwelling are themselves the impetus for action, which takes the shape of Kabyle ways of dwelling. Culture generates action which is meaningful because cultural. Yet in other parts of de Certeau’s work, the impetus for tactical manoeuvre – for resistance and *perruque* – does not come from culture; rather, it is (popular) culture. The meaningfulness of action, then, is immanent in action itself. If this is the case, then action must be generated elsewhere, and it is here that de Certeau
appeals to more fundamental and universal human capacities, which make his account more of a theological than a theoretical one:

Many everyday practices . . . are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many ‘ways of operating’: victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’ . . . clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning’, maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike. The Greeks called these ‘ways of operating’ metis. But they go much further back, to the immemorial intelligence displayed in the tricks and imitations of plants and fishes. From the depths of the ocean to the streets of modern megalopolises, there is a continuity and permanence of these tactics. (de Certeau 1984: xix–xx)

Put this way, the tactic is a realisation of evolutionary process, and of human nature. The redemptive possibility of the tactic is therefore the redemption of humanity in its natural state – of how humans should be. For Herder, Hamann and Vico, this redemption is with and for God. Herder sees persons realising themselves within the context of the group which acts, as the person acts, in pursuit of Providence. For Hamann, revelation was always an act of communication between two spirits: the person and God. The same is true of de Certeau’s account. In a situation where the monotheism of religion itself and of the political order no longer command people’s faith, he locates faith in the polytheism of tactical practices. Resistance is redemption:

‘the essential element in any spiritual experience is not some “otherness” quite outside of language and time’. Rather, it is precisely within the specificity of the believer’s cultural situation ‘that his yearnings and his predicaments “take flesh”; it is through this medium that he finds God, yet ever seeks him, that he expresses his faith, that he carries on simultaneously experiments in colloquy with God and with his actual brothers’. (Bauerschmidt 2000: 210 – citing de Certeau 1966 ‘Culture and Spiritual Experience’)

Conclusion

The debate between Bourdieu and de Certeau reproduces a wider cleavage within European intellectual history, between Socialism and Catholicism. The debate between Gramsci and Croce over Italian historiography is another example of this wider tension between an immanent theory of society and the subject, and a transcendent one. For whilst Bourdieu – and Gramsci before him – seeks to locate subjectivity and the capacity for agency within the given structural conditions of a particular time and place – ‘a particular type of environment’ (Bourdieu 1977: 73) – de Certeau – like Croce – saw them as transcendent features of the person, conceived as an eternal soul, endowed with the capacity for agency in the very essence of their being.

Hence, where Ortner (2005: 34) calls for an anthropological theory of subjectivity that does not rely on an assumption of ‘originary will’, this is precisely what de Certeau offers us – an understanding of agency, more theology than theory, that locates it in a mysterious and universal human capacity. Although he shares with Geertz an intellectual debt to the counter-Enlightenment, it is Geertz who develops its potential more fully, moving away from explicit pessimism and anti-modernism to develop the implications of relativistic populism for an understanding of subjectivity. What he adds is
a socio-cultural mechanism for the shaping of subjectivity that enables us to understand the motivation for and meaning of agency in particular contexts. This contrasts with the universalism of de Certeau’s approach, and serves to de-moralise what is a morally charged understanding of agency.

De Certeau appears to see the agency of tactics as not only a realisation of human nature, but also as actions that are morally good – because oriented in opposition to the morally suspect strategies of the politically powerful. To this extent, his work shares with contemporary ethnographic work on resistance not only an ethnographic ‘thin-ness’ (Ortner 1995), but also an assumption of the moral value of resistance that ensures the redemption of both the ethnographic subject and the ethnographer herself. As Michael Brown (1996) has argued, the crisis of representation and resultant crisis of expertise has left social scientists, and perhaps particularly anthropologists, with a problem in justifying their research. To counter this, justification has been created, through identifying a moral and political purpose – of uncovering resistance, even in the most unlikely places:

In this emergent occupational milieu, attributions of resistance become an important rhetorical tool. By finding grassroots resistance in Mexican *telenovelas* or the household rituals of the Javanese, we reassure ourselves that the pursuit of what might seem to be esoteric ethnographic detail is really a form of high-minded public service. (Brown 1996: 729–30)

Brown goes on to argue that anthropologists’ incessant pursuit of resistance leads to an ethnographic ‘flattening’ in which all action is reduced to a single cause. What emerges is a new Functionalism, in which ethnographic variation is sacrificed in favour of a celebration of the human capacity for action (see also Sahlins 1993). Whilst this is, perhaps, a laudable aim, it does not help us to understand the various contexts and forms that the system/action dialectic takes, and the various meanings that structure people’s understandings and responses to it. In reproducing this moralising stance on resistance, whilst at the same time eschewing a systematic treatment of people’s motivation to act – such as Bourdieu’s development of *habitus* – de Certeau appears unable to offer us a useful theory for ethnographic analysis. Rather, he presents a theology of the human spirit as redemptive counter-point to the moral bankruptcy of modernity – a fourth critique of the Enlightenment.

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**References**


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Abstracts

Un quatrième détecteur de l’héritage des lumières: Michel de Certeau et l’ethnographie de la subjectivité

Cet article examine la contribution potentielle de l’œuvre de Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) aux théories anthropologiques de l’action (agency), de la résistance et de la subjectivité. Nous développons l’argument que l’œuvre de de Certeau et la théorie anthropologique contemporaine ont en commun une opposition à l’héritage des Lumières qui combine un pessimisme profond vis-à-vis de la société moderne avec l’insistance sur les possibilités rédemptrices du populisme, de l’expressivisme et du pluralisme. Alors qu’en anthropologie ces questions ont abouti à une théorisation complexe de l’action, de la résistance et de la subjectivité imbriquées dans des contextes socioculturels, de Certeau donne l’impression d’éviter systématiquement toute théorie cohérente. Il propose plutôt une théologie de l’action, de la résistance, et de la subjectivité qui perçoit la résistance à travers des ⟨tactiques⟩ comme la manifestation d’un esprit anti-moderne persistant, et comme intrinsèquement et moralement bon. L’article se termine en déconseillant aux anthropologues d’adopter une posture ⟨théologique⟩ équivalente envers la résistance.

Die vierte Kritik der Aufklärung: Michel de Certeau und die Ethnographie der Subjektivität


Una cuarta crítica a la Ilustración: Michel de Certeau y la etnografía de la subjectividad

Este ensayo se centra en la relevancia del trabajo de Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) para las teorías antropológicas de agencia, resistencia y subjetividad. El trabajo de Certeau comparte con la teoría antropológica contemporánea la herencia de contra-ilustración que combina un profundo pesimismo sobre la sociedad moderna con un énfasis en la posibilidad redentora del populismo, expresivismo y pluralismo. Mientras que estos conceptos se convirtieron en la antropología en una compleja teorización de la agencia, resistencia y subjetividad que se encuentran contenidas en un contexto sociocultural, de Certeau evitó sistemáticamente desarrollar una teoría comprensiva. En su lugar, Certeau
elaboró una teología de la agencia, resistencia y subjetividad donde la resistencia es observada en términos de “técnicas”, como la manifestación de un persistente espíritu humano contra-moderno, que es inherente y moralmente bueno. El ensayo termina con una advertencia para los antropólogos que adoptan una postura “teológica” similar con respecto a la resistencia.