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Michel de Certeau: Ethnography and the challenge of plurality¹

The saliency of Michel de Certeau's work cannot be condensed into a paragraph, a page or even an entire article as the nature of his analysis defeats neat disciplinary categorisations. The number of intellectual biographies (Giard 1987, 1988; Giard et al. 1991; Geffré 1991; Ahearne 1995; Buchanan 2000; Ward 2000; Dosse 2002, 2006; Highmore 2006), and journal issues (*Diacritics* 1992 (22, 2), *Social Semiotics* 1996 (6, 1), *New Blackfriars* 1996 (77), *Paragraph* 1999 (22, 2) and *South Atlantic Quarterly* 2001 (100, 2)) devoted to his work and published since his death in 1986 attest to his broader influence. De Certeau's work has therefore been revisited and reassessed in numerous disciplinary circles. Curiously, however, anthropology, so seemingly sponge-like in its theoretical fashions, has not engaged extensively with de Certeau's work.² This is despite the fact that de Certeau's primary thematic concerns were peculiarly anthropological in nature. Issues of representation and resistance, marginality and minorities, power and plurality dominated his studies, which spanned topics as diverse as early modern mysticism, travel narratives of the new world, urban everyday life and contemporary policy on multi-culturalism. Furthermore, de Certeau was an architect of a theory of practice and of historical enquiry, both of which have gained considerable relevance to anthropological perspectives since the 1960s. We are not arguing here that de Certeau has been completely forgotten by anthropologists, of course (for examples see Pandolfi 1992; Ivy 1995; Ferme 2001; Hernández 2002), but that his recognition in anthropology is very limited compared to that in other disciplines (history, literature, religious studies, cultural studies). So why has de Certeau's thinking been so little used in our discipline? The papers collected here originated out of an attempt to consider this question. Each

- 1 We would like to thank all the participants and respondents at the Workshop: 'Michel de Certeau: Ethnographies of Everyday Life and Anthropological Returns of Histories' held at the University of Sussex, 1 June 2005 and in particular Professor Richard Fardon for his inspiring and thoughtful remarks. We would also like to thank Peter Pels for his patience and significant editorial support.
- 2 This certainly applies to British and North American anthropological traditions. On his role in French anthropological circles see Dosse (2002).

contributor, from his or her own perspective, asks why de Certeau is not cited more extensively in anthropological discussions on subjectivity (Mitchell, Napolitano), on the textual 'turn' (Highmore), on resistance (Cornwall) and on religious experience (Pratten). What relevance then does de Certeau's work, written mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, have for anthropology today?

Michel de Certeau's research interests, which focused on marginality, otherness and de-centredness, mirror something of the themes of his own career trajectory. He was born in 1925 in Savoie from a provincial aristocratic family. De Certeau had an itinerant education, having studied at the universities of Grenoble, Lyon and Paris as well as various Catholic seminaries. As a young man he was attracted to the Carthusian monastic life, but joined the Society of Jesus in 1950 and was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1956. It was during this period that his interests in Christian theology, philosophy and mysticism were consolidated and became a platform for his later work. The Jesuit Order's interest during the 1950s in their first spiritual authors during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led de Certeau to study Pierre Favre, a contemporary of Ignatius of Loyola. His work on Favre's spiritual diary (1960) earned de Certeau a doctorate from the Sorbonne. Later, and throughout his career, he studied the life and devotional literature of the Jesuit Jean-Joseph Surin. De Certeau edited his *Guide spirituel pour la perfection* (1963) and *Correspondance* (1966) as well as examining Surin's role as the exorcist in the 'theatre of devils' at Loudun between 1634 and 1637. This analysis would be published as *La possession de Loudun* (1970b) (English translation 2000). De Certeau was also engaged with editorial work on the Jesuit journals to which he also contributed, including *Études* and *Christus*. During this period he played an important role in the development of a radical Catholic theology in France (Dosse 2002: 74).

In 1974 he published together with Jean-Marie Domenach, the Director of the journal *Esprit* and a good friend of Michel Foucault, a collection of essays entitled *Le christianisme éclaté* (de Certeau and Domenach 1974). In this work on the transformation of the Catholic Church, de Certeau set out what would later be seen as the foundation of his thinking, the transition from early modern orality and mysticism to modern practices of writing and religion which he termed the 'scriptural economy' (Dosse 2002: 207).³ He would continue his studies on these themes throughout his life and published *La fable mystique, Vol. 1: XVIe–XVIIe siècle* in 1982, with an English translation appearing as *The mystic fable* in 1992. *The mystic fable* directly reflects his earlier interest and involvement with the Freudian School and Lacanian circle in Paris. From 1963 de Certeau attended Jacques Lacan's *École freudienne* in Paris, where he developed his sympathy for psychoanalysis not for therapy so much as for an understanding of loss, belief and the Other (de Certeau 1970a, 1986). Hence psychoanalytic influences are at their best in his work when he engages narratives and histories through the presence of loss, and when he examines how they are evoked by socially situated disjunctures between language, affects and bodily practices.

Through Jesuit university networks he travelled and taught in Latin America, notably in Brazil. It was from these travels that he produced a ground-breaking collection of essays *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (1975), translated as *The writing of history* in English in 1988. In recognising the ways in which history is re-authored, re-

3 De Certeau's initial idea of the multiplicity of paths can be read as part of a French Jesuit's response to the Holy See's publication of a 1968 encyclica *Humanae Vitae* that condemned, among others, non-natural forms of contraception (Ibid. p. 209).

inscribed and re-configured, de Certeau tables some of his central concerns around the practice of writing history. This work also highlighted the violence intrinsic to processes of historical translation which anticipated the postcolonial critique developed by Said (1978) and Spivak (1987) of the essentialised project of European representations of plural Others. In terms now very familiar to anthropologists, he called for epistemological self-awareness and ethical commitment from historians as they reconstruct the relationship between past and text.

De Certeau emerged on to the public stage as a result of the events in Paris during May 1968, with his much-publicised reaction that speech had been ‘captured’ in 1968 just as the Bastille had been captured in 1789 (de Certeau 1968). *La prise de parole* was translated as *The capture of speech and other political writings* (1997a). The focus of his more overtly political texts was a simple one – how could peaceful multiculturalism be sustained between persons and social groups who were separated by their differences and eager to preserve them? He published extensively on this topic, including on policies of language and diversity in *La culture au pluriel* (1974) translated as *Culture in the plural* (1997b), and later in *Heterologies: discourse on the other* (1986), which captures his interest in literature, narratives, marginality and alterity. Perhaps his most well-known book, *L’invention du quotidien, Vol. 1: Arts de faire* (1980), which was translated into English as *The practice of everyday life* (1984), set out to propose new ways in which users, ordinary folk, might escape the passivity and rule-bound models of structuralist analysis through tactics of evasion and escape. In so doing and in capturing so many of his concerns (belief, space, practice, writing), it may be seen to constitute his most representative and accessible work.

In Paris de Certeau taught theology, psychoanalysis, anthropology and history before applying for a position at *L’École des Hautes Études et Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) in Paris in 1977 for which he was turned down. He, as Derrida and Latour later, had been enthused by University of California–Paris connections. Hence, the American West Coast became his intellectual hub as a result, and from 1978 he taught literature at San Diego before becoming a full professor in comparative literature in 1983. De Certeau returned to France as *Directeur d’Études*, a full professorship at EHESS, in 1984, just two years before his death, in January 1986, from pancreatic cancer at the age of 61.

This brief and compressed intellectual biography at least marks the eclecticism and innovativeness of his approach, which combined religious studies, history, anthropology and psychoanalysis. Commentators are often forced to ask themselves whether, as a result, a common thread or theory can be identified in order to mark the integrity and coherence of his work. Identifying such a framework is complicated not only by the ‘unnerving’ diversity of his subjects and the interdisciplinarity of his approach (see Highmore, this issue), but also by his dense and frustrating prose style, by his apparently deliberate evasion in elaborating his overarching claims, and by his reluctance to pursue many of the avenues to which he points. De Certeau’s rich and evocative descriptions and his insightful and uncanny turns of phrase are therefore often matched in equal measure by obscurity and dead ends. As such, de Certeau’s legacy is as provocative as it is broad, as suggestive as it is unsatisfying.

We can, nevertheless, identify related areas in de Certeau’s work which may present problems and possibilities for critical ethnography. These related points may both answer our original question of why he has not been embraced by anthropologists, and suggest observations that may be of relevance in our practice. Ben Highmore, for

instance, suggests that the coherent thread of de Certeau's diverse range is not a 'high' theoretical theme, but a method, a way of operating which encourages heterogeneity and allows alterity to proliferate. It is a method that Highmore argues can open up pathways through the epistemological scepticism generated by the post-modernist turn. In addition we argue that de Certeau provides a potentially productive synergy of registers with which to engage the study of human subjectivity that defies neat theorisation and invites a focus on ethnographic details. De Certeau sees processes of 'othering' and religiosity as fundamental registers of everyday social formations in this context, and points us to privilege the plurality of histories, phenomenologies and embodied narratives that compose an ethnographic field over reductionist singular interpretations. His work also illuminates micro-history as a central heritage for the anthropological project, especially for the dynamics that language plays in articulating political identities through historical narratives. And he sheds lights on geographies of subjectification and resistance in a model that contrasts strategies and tactics which continues to provide new possibilities for anthropological critique. Let us take these points in turn to flesh out some of the possibilities and weaknesses of de Certeau's work for anthropology.

Subjectivity, narrative and absence

Based on a reading of Geertz's theory of culture, Sherry Ortner argues in a recent article that to engage with the complexity of subjectivity we need to connect a critical understanding of culture and language to the formation of power and religious understanding. For Ortner, subjectivity, in its lived expression, is different from the processes of subjectification, as it is located at the critical encounter between the 'state of mind of real actors embedded in the social world, *and* . . . cultural formations that (at least partially) express, shape and constitute those states of mind' (Ortner 2005: 45):

This culturally/religiously produced subject is defined not only by a particular position in a social, economic and religious matrix, but by a complex subjectivity, a complex set of feelings and fears, which are central to a whole argument. (Ortner 2005: 37)

In her view, this critical encounter between the subjective and the social generates anxieties over the mastery of practices and process of signification.⁴

Ortner's call to critically re-engage with the question of subjectivity in social theory points us to the potential, de Certeau acknowledged, of historicising the tension between 'states of mind' and 'cultural formations' as produced in the plurality of social practice. He provides a methodology, it is argued, to grasp subjectivity in its fragmented forms, since he unsettles models of internalised subjectivity (and therefore its confinement to a cognitive/psychological level) by constantly connecting internalisation to modes of political, historical critique and the production of narratives. More than ever, this applies to the emergence of fragmented selves in an age of late capitalism, both as sense of loss and as sense of (ironic dis-)connection. This human subjectivity encompasses

4 For a critical review of the claim that practice theory mediates the distinction between social and subjective, see Reyna (1997).

multiple forms that proliferate at the margins of legitimised readings. Hence, rather than situating this process either in a cognitive-social or in a phenomenological field, Michel de Certeau's work situates human subjectivity within the interstices which emerge in *a process of translation* between different registers of history, everyday practices and religiosity. This is part of an historicisation of subjectivity where details, otherness, absences, singularities and intersubjectivity ought to be explored. Andrea Cornwall's article in this issue, for instance, illustrates how this understanding of subjectivity as the act of translation of contingencies, affects, losses, dis-locations and choices into life narratives helps us to better understand Nigerian women's paths to (dis)empowerment, rather than through a well-established, but reductionist development paradigm of subject's situated choices. Hence ethnography's concern with the singularity and detail of plural forms is not only to be located in the linking of 'different knowledges that are possible from different *locations* and tracing lines of possible alliances and common purposes between them' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 39). It is also an attention to the *irreducibility of practice* that is a thorn in the side of the crafting of hegemonic knowledge.

Many of these conceptual understandings of self and other are reflected in de Certeau's work on religion and mysticism. An important point in de Certeau's work is the difference between the mystical and mysticism. Mysticism is an 'experimental knowledge', a way of talking and perceiving the world that emerges in historically located moments (since the late Middle Ages) against a canonical Catholic theology, and which is not normally 'inscribed in the social community of faith and religious references' (de Certeau 1992: 13). Hence, mysticism arises against the backdrop of modern Western discourse, while the mystical, instead, is an adjective that describes a secret and concealed aspect of experience (de Certeau 1992: 97–9). For de Certeau the 'death of God' in the late Middle Ages was when an unmediated presence of God in the world became translated into an understanding of its presence through textual scriptures. From that point onwards the presence of God was condemned to mystical sensibilities placed outside 'historical rationalism' and outside the social (de Certeau 1988: 133). This loss of the un-mediated presence of God, he argues, coincided with the birth of the 'modern' subject driven by introspection for that which was lost. This loss is often entrusted to a sense that cannot be named, a language that cannot be believed or to a trace that while present cannot be seen. In this de Certeau shares with Williams a concern for the social hierarchies produced by both residual and emergent narratives (Williams 1977) and a sensibility to the importance of structures of feeling.

Thinking of identity formation through a process of loss and irreducible pluralities opens up interesting questions for ethnographic engagements. In the passage between the plurality of experience and an ethnographic narrative there is both a dramatic loss and a pluralistic desire for interpretation. Hence ethnographic texts are perpetually cursed with a loss of embodied meanings, but also potentially blessed by pluralistic desires and impulses (de Certeau 1988: 227). We are not here arguing that anthropologists have failed to engage with this problematic juncture. There is a burgeoning literature on the anthropology of the senses and on the phenomenology of the body (Jackson 1996; Stoller 1997, 2002). Perhaps, nevertheless, we should resist reducing our ethnographic research to an anthropocentric paradigm and take a renewed interest in the study of plural ontologies, especially in the forms of an 'ontology that eludes the powerful' (see Pratten, this issue). In this respect de Certeau's work can be read as anticipating current reflections on the nature of this paradigm. That is to say, a rethinking of intersubjectivity

and agency of non-human agents against our own anthropocentric distinction between 'natural' objects and 'human' subjects. In a wonderfully rich reflection on Amerindian ontologies, Viveiros de Castro puts it thus:

Though there are Amazonian cosmologies that deny to postmythical non-human species any spiritual dimension, the notion (widespread, as is well known, throughout the continent) of animals or plant, "spirit masters" supplies the missing agency. These spirit masters, equipped with an intentionality fully equivalent to that of humans, function as hypostases of the species with which they are associated, thereby creating an intersubjective field for human/nonhuman relations even where empirical nonhuman species are not spiritualized. Moreover, the idea that nonhuman agents experience themselves and their behaviour in the form of (human) culture plays a crucial role: translating culture into the terms of alien subjectivities transforms many natural objects and events into indices from which social agency is derivable. The commonest case is that of defining what to humans is a brute fact or object as an artefact of cultured behaviour: what is blood to us is manioc beer to jaguars, a muddy waterhole is seen by tapirs as a great ceremonial house. (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 470–1; see also Pandolfo 1997)

Rethinking the location of intentionality in the relationship between epistemologies (as productions and consumptions of narratives) and ontologies (as localised and (dis)embodied transformations of knowledge) in this light is central to Valentina Napolitano's contribution. Anthropologists, she argues, need to address the presence of the unseen and unintelligible in the events and objects that constitute their fieldwork. In a move that echoes de Certeau's debt to Lacan, Napolitano highlights a 'mirroring' of hearts that flash across migrant itineraries populating the Roman urban landscape which, she shows, reveal both the circulation of deep-seated anxieties both about the pollution of a migrant Other and the present Western cardiovascular paralysis as well as the possibility for renewed forms of counter-narratives from the periphery. In this context Napolitano evokes de Certeau's insights on alterity, space and visibility. Juxtaposing official, 'visible' migrant histories with those hidden but observed and intimated through ethnography, Napolitano contrasts discourses on the cultural heritage of the Roman landscape with practices of migrants' re-appropriation of spaces within Santa Maria della Luce church (where the Catholic Latin American mission is based), and contrasts the texts of clerical discourses that stress monogamy in Catholic households with practices of adultery, intimacy and eroticism.

Jon Mitchell sets out to examine the kind of theory of practice, resistance and subjectivity that de Certeau might offer to anthropologists from another interpretative angle. He observes that de Certeau's evocative description of everyday and bodily forms of resistance open to the modern subject is difficult to criticise. In his view, however, the utility of this approach as a theoretical model, comparable with those of de Certeau's contemporaries, is limited. Where Bourdieu and Foucault view subjectivity more as a reflex of broader structural processes, for de Certeau agency and the capacity to resist seems to originate in the irreducible essence of the person, the human soul. Hence, Mitchell suggests that de Certeau's work is better seen as a theology than a theory, since he sees the action of everyday resistance as relatively autonomous from socially-derived subjectivity and rooted in the redemptive qualities of human action. De Certeau's theory of agency is animated by unknowable, immemorial depths of knowledge, an explanation of the capacity to subvert which cannot satisfy social anthropologists and which leads to

a 'thin' historical and ethnographic account of agency and resistance. Mitchell therefore locates de Certeau's perspective on subjectivity within a tension between a theory of subjectivity that locates the capacity for agency within the given structural conditions of a time and place versus a capacity located within the transcendent features of the person conceived as an eternal soul. Mitchell suggests that these debates form part of a trajectory of tension between Socialism (from Gramsci to Bourdieu) and Catholicism (from Croce to de Certeau).

Where Mitchell explores de Certeau's analysis of resistance as redemption, David Pratten seeks to examine the reverse hypothesis, redemption as resistance. Specifically, he compares approaches to the writing of possession dramas in an analysis of the *Possession at Loudun* and a Christian revival movement in colonial Nigeria. While de Certeau's insights regarding narrative plurality, and the phenomenology of the body in possession enquiries are powerful and significant, they are hardly novel aspects of contemporary historical ethnography. De Certeau's analysis is most limited and yet most suggestive, Pratten suggests, where it focuses on the relationship between resistance and ecstatic worship. Like Mitchell, he finds the thinness of de Certeau's model of resistance lies in his definition of the origins of mysticism in romantic, elusive and negative terms. In its focus on semiotics, performance and language, however, de Certeau's framework for understanding social critique, which highlights how the marginalised represent their marginality, resonates in provocative and productive ways with comparative perspectives on religion and resistance.

The making of history

Historical science, de Certeau argues, operates in the tension between the past which is 'brought to life' by historical study, and the principles of intelligibility from which relevant 'facts' are produced. As such, de Certeau, along with Hayden White (1973), was instrumental in introducing historians to the 'poetics of historiography', the rules, codes and conventions that frame historical writing (Carrard 2001: 465). Michel de Certeau's invitation to explore new terrain and imagine the sorts of situated knowledge that have produced historical sources and their locations in historiographic practice leads us to study not archives and artefacts, but the making of them. It is this 'transformation of archival activity' which de Certeau argues is the point of departure and the condition of a new history (de Certeau 1988: 75), which in anthropology has been more significantly inspired by Foucault, Derrida, White, and by neo-Marxist historiography (Dirks 1992; Trouillot 1995; Cohn 1996; Stoler 2002).

As significant as these observations on the poetics of historiography, however, is another set of concerns that de Certeau raises about presence and absence in historical and ethnographic writing. In particular, his work reminds us how 'fluid and legendarily diverse history becomes when figured in the unconscious movements of language and symbolic exchange' (Conley 1988: xvi). This diversity arises not only in the versions of history, but specifically in the range of sensorial experience (or the *réel* which he derives from Lacanian psychoanalysis), which is filtered through systems of knowledge and belief and out of history. It is a plurality then that historians and ethnographers confront in their practices of selection and exclusion and when they encounter a world of forms, lapses and silences that resist the intelligibility of writing (Pieters 2000; Peltonen 2001; Weymans 2004). In contrast to Lacan, however, de Certeau does not see narratives in

irreconcilable schism from their subject. Rather more hopefully he suggests that the unintelligibility of experience is a possible engine for social transformation – a possibility at the edge of the symbolic order that may transform the symbolic order itself.

De Certeau recognises the same rich, creative, polyphonic world of heteroglossia that Bakhtin describes, but for de Certeau there is always the problem that when this aspect of everyday life becomes the topic for disciplinary scrutiny, it is cut and managed and its radical and unsettling plurality is controlled. Anticipating the ‘literary turn’, Ben Highmore suggests that de Certeau’s view on the ‘writing culture’ debate would have taken a different direction. De Certeau insists on our obligation to connect to the ‘real’ in the face of epistemological scepticism concerning the ‘constructed’ nature of authoritative narratives. De Certeau does not side-step this scepticism, Highmore argues, but embraces it with a radical recognition of the ‘situatedness’ of knowledge. Like Bakhtin, therefore, de Certeau embraces fiction through the novel, the folktale and the narrative in its capacity to stage complexity, multiplicity and embodied experiences. De Certeau’s commitment to multi-vocal versions is manifest in the historiographical method he adopted in writing *The possession at Loudun* (Weymans 2004: 166). Where de Certeau differs from Bakhtin, Highmore argues, is that he does not recognise a constant presence of heteroglossia, but instead its strategic appearance and disappearance. In presenting different overlapping and sometimes contradictory stories, each of a different period and each rooted in political and epistemological transformations, de Certeau not only retains a non-authoritative authorial stance, but more importantly illustrates to the reader that which is lost, missing and fragmentary in the process of writing history.

Political subjectivities

Within political anthropology it may seem that de Certeau’s never more than fleeting influence has now waned. He was invoked briefly and rarely in detail in work on resistance by anthropologists because he sought to discover and describe the ways in which populations manage and ‘make do’ in the face of disciplinary mechanisms (Keith and Pile 1997). More familiar to an anthropological audience is the analysis of ‘infrapolitics’ made famous by James Scott in his analysis of the hidden transcripts and sequestered social sites of everyday resistance (Scott 1985, 1990, 1998). Scott’s project, like de Certeau’s, has been described as the flip side of Foucault, as an archaeology of resistance. De Certeau offers a distinctly alternative analytic, though it has been criticised for drawing too rigid an opposition between the official (the proper) and the everyday (the popular), for failing to recognise relationships of complicity and processes of consensus, and for providing only a partial cartography of the spaces between compliance and resistance.

Yet, Michel de Certeau’s insights can further illuminate the micro-political processes by which people ‘make’ postcolonial modes of governance and ‘make do’ in the face of their disorder. To focus on modes of domination is not peculiar, de Certeau argues, but to do so exclusively is to underplay the political agency of ordinary people:

The privilege enjoyed by the problematics of repression in the field of research should not be surprising . . . But this elucidation of the apparatus by itself has the disadvantage of not seeing practices which are heterogeneous to it and which it

represses or thinks it represses. Nevertheless, they have every chance of surviving this apparatus too, and, in any case, they are also part of social life, and all the more resistant because they are more flexible and adjusted to perpetual mutation. When one examines this fleeting and permanent reality carefully, one has the impression of exploring the night-side of societies, a night longer than their day, a dark sea from which successive institutions emerge, a maritime immensity on which socioeconomic and political structures appear as ephemeral islands. (de Certeau 1984)

From this perspective it is possible better to understand the heterogeneous practices through which ordinary people survive by wit and improvisation, practices that are necessarily obscured from the glare of repressive governmental apparatus. Our attention, therefore must focus on an analysis of what de Certeau alludes to here as the 'night-side of societies' to describe the ambiguous, shadowy quality of institutions and individual motivations that populate the political landscape, for it is here that de Certeau's everyday practices 'hollow out' other spaces within a panoptic space (Conley 2001). Indeed, following Timothy Mitchell's insight, one can argue that political subjects and their modes of resistance are formed within rather than beyond the organisational terrain of the state (Mitchell 1991). Modes of collective action operate within the contours and fault lines of this landscape, not outside it.

De Certeau therefore distinguishes between two ways of operating, the strategies of the strong and tactics which are the 'art of the weak':

[A tactic] takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. (de Certeau 1984)

Tactics, de Certeau argues, are determined by the absence of power. They must play on and within a terrain imposed upon them and therefore manoeuvre 'within the enemy's field of vision' (de Certeau 1984). It is in tactics then that de Certeau offers hope of redemption from the overbearing panopticism of modern society.

In describing the complexity, plurality, temporality and improvisation of their actions, de Certeau's framework is especially helpful in coming to terms with the practice of governance, since his analysis shows how the 'weak' make use of the 'strong' and create for themselves a sphere of autonomous action and self-determination. Andrea Cornwall captures this sense of the tactic in her critique of the 'clean-cut causalities' employed by economists and development agencies who work with women in the informal sector. Her account of women's life histories in south-western Nigeria illustrates just how the individualistic account of women's agency captured in economic empowerment discourses are undercut by contingency and the use of tactics to manage uncertainty. These tactics of survival are based on complex intersubjective relations of sociality, intimacy and affect. The conceptions of agency employed by development planners look far more like strategic choices which are unlikely in the absence of capital. Policies based on such models, Cornwall argues, are likely to have limited effects.

Concluding remarks, opening challenges

De Certeau's work unsettles the use of theory as a point of arrival that solves, or pacifies, the struggles between a multiplicity of everyday practices. His approach questions theory as a logic which reads ethnographic encounters as fully translatable into an accepted way of knowing. In this sense he is an anti-theorist, wary of theories of interpretation though no less alive, as Highmore suggests, to the possibilities of alternative interpretative modalities. In different ways the articles in this issue show how de Certeau is central to an anthropological 'sympathy' with the plurality of formations which constitute subjectivity, and by keeping a healthy scepticism about the bounding nature of that which is accepted as visible and knowable at particular historical conjunctures, he compels us to dwell on the margins of signification.

There are multiple readings of de Certeau's work on these issues of subjectivity and historical narrative and this issue does not claim to provide an exhaustive endpoint. Nonetheless, de Certeau's contribution, within its limitations and convolutedness, helps us to reflect on the encounter between the plurality of everyday practice, its irreducibility and un-intelligibility, and the narratives of and at the margins. In a recent introduction, Das and Poole argue that margins of the state are fruitfully explored by engaging ethnographic narratives of legibility and illegibility:

In our seminar discussions, however, we soon realized that our ethnographies worked against the notion that the state is somehow "about" its legibility. Rather, our papers seemed to point instead to the many different spaces, forms, and practices through which the state is continually both experienced and undone through the *intelligibility* of its own practices, documents and words. (Das and Poole 2004: 9–10; author's italics)

In their readings, margins of the state are not mere stories and sites of exclusion; they can be dangerous processes of re-articulation of sovereignty, especially when they demarcate states of exception where biopolitics meet the politics of death and terror.

We are clear that de Certeau's analysis of biopolitics did not have the sophistication of current debates, but we think that it is to these current debates that de Certeau offers useful insight. By engaging with the Other within (*not* transcending) immanent and everyday practices, de Certeau foregrounds a political ontology that sees otherness not only as a space of annihilating death, but as the starting point to take the irreducibility of everyday practice as a creative challenge. Recognising that de Certeau's approach is framed within long-seated theological histories of redemption, we can nevertheless 'think the margins' both as dangerous and creative. We may therefore be able to take seriously the challenge of 'translating' the irreducibility of everyday life into ethnographic practice, and with it explore human subjectivity in its narrative (mis)translations in more nuanced and ethically engaged ways.

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