

## A Critique of Michel de Certeau's 'Walking in the City' to Locate Elements Concerning Dichotomy of Power and Resistance

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight the opposing dichotomies presented in the book, *The Practice of Everyday Life* where Michel de Certeau offers a detailed recount of how urban sprawl becomes an impediment for the citizen living there, particularly the Mahathan city in which the labyrinthine ways and buildings turn out to be an embarrassing administrative experience for the authorities controlling the movement of the inhabitants. The paper also finds out how city authorities make rules and implement them, and how the dwellers violate and infringe these rules. Also, the third part of the paper concerns with the appropriation and values attributed to the city and pavements by the citizens. The paper owes its debt for research to the 'Planning Theory' presented by Jill Grant (1994). The study is qualitative in nature and employs Adam Smith's city economic plans to write this paper. The study finds out that no matter how strict the control of the city administration may be, citizens have their own ways to trespass and dismiss these overarching rules.

**Keywords:** City, Space, Power, Resistance, Administration, Streets.

### Introduction

*The Practice of Everyday Life* by Michel de Certeau is a masterpiece in its own right for its in-depth engagement with the rhetoric of space and its manipulation. The whole book is fraught with dichotomies or binary opposites, such as, ideal and real, the voyeur-god and practitioner, overt and covert power mechanisms, the theoretical and the practiced, speech and acts—so is the relationship between power and resistance, oppositional yet reciprocal. This essay represents the dichotomy of New York City; the first is a view of New York from the World Trade Center's first tower. The second is a closer look at the city's streets. The two perspectives, one city, and for de Certeau, there is a striking difference between viewing the city through the eyes of a deity and experiencing it through the eyes of people who live 'down below'. The paper is set to unlock a few details about the city administration which works day and night to ensure a proper urban plan and make building,

pavements, gardens, markets. He defines it that these rules, however hard and rigorous they are, are punctured by the users. This paper also finds that the economic drive of the stakeholders by building markets where the government or administration does not allow space to be used by private companies, make the availability of space or restricted room, a dream for the authorities. Therefore, the paper tries to find out the connection between the power operation mechanism exercised by the city administration and the resistance offered by the walkers.

### Rationale of the Study

Studies on Michel de Certeau's 'Walking in the City', *The Practice of Everyday Life* have been conducted with respect to social, political, anthropological and moral aspects but the modern issues of space rhetoric, power imbalance and resistance have been given least attention. The mechanism and distribution of space is a contemporary issue that needs proper researching

and attention. Administration based on rules, endorsed by power and violation of these rules, and perpetrated by the practitioners set up the perspective of this paper. Therefore, power and resistance are the main issues discussed in the paper to highlight such important issues.

### **Aims and Objectives**

This paper aims at the understanding of the mechanism of power issues that the city administrators employ and take shelter in, and the opposing threat the administration confronts from the citizens. The main objective of the paper is to highlight those secret practices so that English literary studies might be alerted towards and connected to the understanding of sociology, political system, civics, and forensic studies. This will also enable readers and researchers, alike, to comprehend the importance of space, place and geography in English Literature. This paper, as it draws on assumptions from three major disciplines; Sociology, Anthropology, Political system, City management, will help the future researchers to understand the kind of problems that the city administration face and how these should be handled and resolved.

### **Research Questions**

**Q1.**How is the connection between power and resistance shown by Michel de Certeau in his 'Walking in the City', *The Practice of Everyday Life*?

**Q2.**What is the role of space and place in English Literature?

### **Delimitation of the Study**

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* is not the only work in which he recounts the daily routines of the citizens and the Argus eyed administration which oversees such movements of them, but most of his works do entail these issues such as how the conurbation and sprawl of the city occurs and how it offers challenges for the controllers of the city regarding pavements, parks, streets and private spaces. But despite the plurality of the aspects de Certeau's wide and expansive range of works offer, the space and scope of this paper does not afford to accommodate more works, therefore, this paper

is delimited only to Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*

### **Methodology**

As this is a qualitative research paper, the researchers have been in debt to the theory related to urban planning by Jill Grant (1994). It draws a lot of assumptions of Jill Grant's concept about city administration and how these loopholes are problematic for the administrators. The text has been analyzed at three levels: from the perspective of initial rules; the claim made by the administrators to use power and its effect or efficiency; and the third and final level is the resistant and the resultant transgression and violation of the citizens. This study partly owes debt to the concept of textuality which demands for proper readings of the articles in order to probe into proper textual doings.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

The city is said to create areas and routes to regulate and govern the people's movements. As a result, there are well-worn pathways that pedestrians are urged to follow, as well as alternate places and even movement patterns which they must strategically handle. Walking through the city, according to de Certeau, is made up of ephemeral moments of conforming and rejecting decisions in response to the spatial order that we travel through and establish with our movement. He claims that a "spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities...and interdictions...the walker actualizes some of these possibilities...But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements." As a result, even in our apparently trivial daily moves around the city, we are continuously bargaining amongst forms of power, such that, through acts of conformity and opposition to prevailing urban ideologies. This paper attempts to discuss the relationship between the role of administration that seeks control of the geographical landscape of a city and the possible resistance it (local authority) receives from its subjects (citizens). Though the city administration or CDA<sup>1</sup> has many functional

units and strategic plans, it may, more often than not, face defiance and non-compliance from its citizens. The administration only creates rules, as mentioned by de Certeau—and then sits idle ‘like Schreiber’s *gaf*’ who is, he says, not all-knowing, and knows very little and thus leaves the city at the mercy of the ‘ordinary practitioners’<sup>2</sup>. There is a totalitarian approach exercised by administration, which is believed, creates a ‘total seeing power’ or a ‘panoptic’ view of the city practices, however, there are some mysterious practices which are executed under smoke screen and are outside the scope of the administrative vigilance/surveillance. De Certeau unearths something very interesting which is ‘the poetic’, ‘anthropological’ and ‘mythic experience of space’ out of the usual city practices (93). De Certeau questions the notion of city as a clearly designed page. If a city is ‘migrational’ or ‘metaphorical’, he argues, how can city become a stable design to read? (P-93). After all, the city is only a concept, it always undergoes semantic re-appropriation by the inhabitants, and the name a city adopts either come from the heroism of its heroes (a battle hero) or from some religious fervor.

Certeau's emphasis on daily life as being created by complicated sets of practices, and in particular, his idea of praxis as a sort of enunciation, is one of his most important contributions to cultural studies. In terms of the enunciative character of praxis, Certeau's key point should be the place and site are not only inactive/intermediate components of the made workplace; rather, these ought to be made working by those who use it' and those who apply such rhetoric through practice. He comments:

“[I]f it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g. by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g. by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege,

transform or abandon spatial elements.”<sup>6</sup>  
(1984, p. 98)

The concept of 'resistance' has long been a staple of the cultural studies canon. Tony Bennett writes in *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (1998, p. 167), ‘Resistance’s obtained least theoretical attention, and on these grounds it is being considered as a positive thing and certainly needs to be nurtured’. He goes on to say that in modern cultural studies work, if some form of theoretical antecedent or authorization is needed to support the focus on 'resistance,' it is most usually provided in connection with *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

In response to Bennett's demand for ‘a broader and richer mapping of the spaces between total compliance and resistance’, this suggestion may be ideally underpinned for ‘a comprehensive and clearer positioning of obedience and defiance’ (1998, p-169). We as researchers can’t exclusively depend only on the schema proffered by de Certeau on the basis of dichotomies, which is related to pre-engineered workout for city disciplined operating mechanism, and the liberty cherished by the city walkers. He further contends and stresses that a comprehensive, stolid, and multifaceted system in which movements, transformations, migration within the jurisdiction of a current city or urban land take place. However, this does not cover all what we want, there is still a weakling space, when a rule is methodically formed, and violating strategies to resist the rules are formed even in anticipation. There should be, the writer lays emphasis on, some sort of cultural inclusiveness so that a description is added and its impact is achieved. Various ways are found to complement de Certeau’s works, and there are some for the [starters] in cultural studies presented in post-Gramscian based on the strategical process towards an ‘articulation theory’ that redefines the power mechanism and nature concerning it, so that a daily behavior is adjusted under power paradigm. Lawrence Grossberg clearly shortens the technique by saying:

“The concept of articulation provides a useful starting point for describing the process of forging connections between practices and effects, as well as of enabling practices to have different,

often unpredicted effects. Articulation links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics. And these links are themselves articulated to larger structures.”<sup>7</sup> (Grossberg 1992, p. 54)

Human beings by nature seek liberation. If liberation has taken a shift from order to entropy, the whole universe craves for it. The blood in artery follows a straight course, since it has no loophole. Once the artery is needed, the blood—rushes out through its miniscule hole—unfollows the order. Similarly, the street walkers/citizens are tied with a chain of rules and they seek independence against it. ‘Our lives are fettered with excessive surveillance governed by the city officials,’ a surveillance that severely hampers our ‘civil liberty’<sup>3</sup>, says Boghosian. She further suggests that ‘as individuals...we must dismantle this surveillance system, if we are to protect the basic [needs] to survive’<sup>4</sup>. The city administration thus creates a utopia of rules while the city dwellers antithetically create a dystopia to fit. The practices of the practitioners microscopically examine the weakness of the administrative strategy and make the most of it. Along tube of rules needs only a needle to puncture. The needle is the symbol of power wielded by the citizens. The argument is, the stakeholders (the capitalists, the industrialists, the ordinary pedestrians, the automobile drivers, and the cyclists etc) attack the administrative weakness. The spaces of the city are also manipulated for the sake of the commercial interests. It is the interest of the economy that shapes up the spaces in city rather than the so-called autonomy of a strategic government. As de Certeau’s advocates, the city’s ‘utopian discourse’ must also recommend a system that replaces the ‘tactics’ used by the ‘opportunists’ (94). Who are the opportunists—then? Only the practitioners? Or the discourse makes themselves? Or the implementers? DeCerteau puts emphasis on the role of the individual that constructs the social order/system rather than the strategy of the hegemonic forces.

However, an individual’s resistance may be extended to certain subaltern and minority groups’ resistance that may overthrow an established order and perpetuate their religious or cultural influence. They can cling to their rituals and offer an invisible resistance, which DeCerteau calls, the ‘ruses’ or ‘surreptitious activities’ with ‘unreadable but stable tactics’ (96). Gaye Yilmaz carried out a quantitative research on the Turkish people living in Germany by applying DeCerteau’s theory of strategies and tactics. The said research found that the Turks showed a powerful resistance to the prevalent governmental power in Germany. They used their own language and visited their own Turkish relatives. They purchased goods from their own Turkish shops. Turkish bargaining adds to ‘[a] hidden way of creating tactics’<sup>5</sup>. Such practices are the challenges offered by the alien/emigrants that jeopardize the unicity of the city’s planning. In other words, these tactics disrupt strategies programmed by the city planners or hegemonic forces. The authority then fails to implement a univocal policy.

For de Certeau, there is a gap between the ‘collective mode’ and ‘individual mode of re-appropriation’ (96). The citizens twist this gap to a special purpose, a space (a spatial practice, a disciplinary space). This re-appropriation is a significant—either linguistic or semantic—value attached to the city by the street walkers/pedestrians; (tall building, square building, populated city, rich city, suffocating city). All these names are secondary to the names being given to the cities at the time of their birth (origin). This is not only the names one ascribes to the city but also the way one behaves and reacts to the system the city operates on to one. De Certeau names it a ‘spatial signifier’ that is ‘transformed into a different ‘thing’...The user of a city chooses ‘certain’ things to ‘actualize them in secret’ (98). This secret is performed in the form of tactics, and these tactics are the spaces available to the practitioner to skulk and detect a vulnerable strategy.

De Certeau, in ‘walking in the city’

adheres to the resistance offered either by the traditions— or by the walkers in the form of displacement, detours etc. Here, de Certeau fails to notice a resistance made by the market stakeholders who build markets and finance buildings and encroach government property/space which offer a challenge to the administrative economic strategies. ‘The relationship between the city and government is like a computer’s operating system to its software’<sup>6</sup>. However, this system can be hacked and intruded on by viruses which are clandestine to the system itself. If there is any space available in the outskirts of the city which is pooled with people, there is an opportunity with the private business men to construct a supermarket. ‘This choice is driven by the consumers’ choice’ and a commercial interest. Here, as Marshall puts it, ‘we don’t seek pre-existing orders issued by the government but undergo a private enterprise’<sup>7</sup>. This economic force is a defiance and resistance to the executives which subsequently leads to Adam Smith’s concept of free-trade,<sup>8</sup>a trade that exclusively advocates private ownership, and dispensing with governmental ordinance. This force may be called an economic inertia, a resistance to the federal plan of manipulating a space.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, we may assume that some rules in a city are codified esoterically that common/uneducated eye fails to decipher these. Therefore, the city falls prey to anarchy where its citizens infringe these rules in oblivion. It may be inferred that a city is a hub of cultural variation, a vehicle for the transportation of identity, a sea of commercial growth. Itself, it keeps no real identity but awaits re-appropriation to be clothed with themes of socio-economic identity. A city is a floating—mass. It is then, a Mona Lisa that has no fixed axis of identity and interpretation.

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