The Spatial Theory of de Certeau, a Vagabond in Stray Space

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Abstract

By using the spatial turn in his search for an alternative space, Michel de Certeau (1925-86) departed from the critique of the absolute space of the nation-state, focusing his attention on stray space which maintains/sustains/enables heterologous differentiation and fragmentation. However, we must note that he foresaw an unsystematic stray space of advertisement and propaganda which flow unceasingly, in which there spreads a micro-revolt without which the stray space has no territory of its own. De Certeau even foresaw an absent space in which the non-place is realized, a space where the Other or the self never become absolute. De Certeau explored the fables of mystics and tried to achieve a space of frustration and silence, expulsion and secession. In this sense, absent space is, by the ethical turn which corrects the limits of scientific rationalism, in a revolutionary space.

Key words: Spatial turn, Practiced place, Absolute space, Stray space, Absent space

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Introduction: Stories of Space

For de Certeau, space is a “product of subject,” a notion that is confused and radically heterologous: “It’s like a tapestry whose horizons encompass historic revolutions, economic changes and demographic mixtures, on which lie customs, rituals and practices,” he wrote.² De Certeau delicately separated space, a territory of daily life, from place, an institutional territory which has its own stability and confers a sort of authority to activities. Only the practiced place could have the basic attribute of stories of space.³

De Certeau’s spatial thought founded on the heterophenomenological experience was developed with John L. Austin’s theory of language acts, Michel Foucault’s discourse theory, Deleuze/Guattari’s nomadism, Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis, Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the field and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception.⁴ For de Certeau, the notion of space stories is an act of strategically producing a space on the plan of “spatial turning” in displacing the text in the concept of space. But why is it perceived as a strategic production? Because this type of projection of space is a process of space production operated by a group of experts having a certain “doctrine” for disguising their way of producing truth.⁵

Spatial turning is thus developed around the idea of stray space which floats without stopping in critiquing the absolute space organized according to the bureaucratic administration and technocracy of a nation-state. De Certeau followed by adding the idea of absent space, which

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³) Ibid., 174.
carries the reflections of every existing spatial structure and all its values, and which reverses them. Absent space is one of displacement, not of opposition in which one creates absence across mutual dialogs.\(^6\) The objective of this research consists in finding a spatial theory that is an ethical turning of space.

**Stray Space: a Space of Differentiation and Fragmentation**

Stray space is the alternative territory where the spatial struggle continues as class struggle, and is the heterologous field where a micro-revolt prepares itself. It is a “practiced place” in which the privileged status and the fixed identity of a subject which were justified until now are doubtful, and where an otherness varied by cultural minorities such as India’s, women’s, blacks’ and Jews’ are accepted.\(^7\) The notion of a “practiced place” reminds us of the concepts of the “wig” and the “poaching,” which served as tools de Certeau used in a diverted manner while he explained the realization of popular culture. First, the “wig” signifies the employment of diverted cunning by which the reader changes, reverses, astonishes and twists the sense of space, and uses transformational tropes. Next, “poaching” is an operation to fabricate a series of cracks on the apparent uniformity of the existing social organization and structure of the space of a text.\(^8\) De Certeau took in a deviant manner the notions of Lefebvre’s\(^9\) terms strategy and tactic, which sought a revolt against alienated everydayness. In de Certeau’s work, strategy becomes a foundation for an absolute space on which

\(^6\) Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 73.


\(^9\) Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne II*, 139.
relations of domination and a calculation of relations between wills to power of subjects are produced. It is the act of assuming a distinct “place” by its realization, and producing an exterior with which shares its border. A strategic place is where, based on the abstract copy, the production of goods, of security, of control and of possession is refined and totalized. Modern politics, economics and scientific rationalism are established on precisely this strategic model.\textsuperscript{10}

By contrast, tactical space is one where people seek an ecological structure in a local dimension. However, the calculation of tactical space does not depend on space in the sense institutionally localized “clean areas” or lines of demarcation. Tactical space shows itself as constantly unstable, secondary and moving. It is a space devoted to the other, that is to say a “practiced place.” A tactic is a technique for minorities and the weak who provide a “political dimension to everyday actions,” and which “makes the weak strong by a potential power to overturn.”\textsuperscript{11} Above all, a tactic is a “course of an adventurous route” which, spatially speaking, exploits the adversary’s time and space by crossing it without leaving tracks or possessing it, being a mutating hybrid whose totality is inestimable. This is because tactics’ courses constitute “an unpredictable and partially unreadable ‘route which crosses’ a space”\textsuperscript{12} in a structurally functionalized and technocratically constructed space. A tactic is thus a “calculated action which defines the absence of something of its own,” and does not possess an autonomous position specific to itself. It is uniquely positioned as the other that de Certeau counted as the most important element in the theory of spaces. What it needs is the ability to organize the rules of unknown powers in a territory imposed by the dominator, that is to say the power to carry on business in a battlefield.

\textsuperscript{11} Certeau, \textit{L’invention du quotidien I}, xvii, 61, 173.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., xlv.
that is ruled and controlled by enemies.\footnote{13}{Ibid., 60-61.}

If strategy generates and “controls” a physical \textit{place}, which is the foundation of long-term power, and if it is an operation which demands stability and economic, scientific symbolic and accumulated capital, then the agile tactic seizes changes in the political situation in an instantaneous moment and strikes the cracks which appear in space or wherever else they are unexpected. It is a combative poetics, a method of mobile attack, of displacement and of strikes which transform the organization of space. A tactic creates a \textit{space} which “erodes” these \textit{places} in a short time by a “practice of bacterias.” The “possibility of non-determinability” is always open in this space; it avoids the capture or power or even rationalization, and “pursues the other interest and cunning of desire which are neither determined nor captures by the dominant system.”\footnote{14}{Ibid., 64.} This is why tactical space is a stray space.

What concretely signifies the “way of practicing space”? According to de Certeau, it starts with the refusal of urbanism developed by city dwellers under the name of rationality.\footnote{15}{Certeau, \textit{La Culture au pluriel}, 205; l’\textit{invention du quotidien 1}, 143-46.} What is important in a \textit{spatial} town is the everyday movement created by pedestrians. The varied attitudes, textures and styles of walking engender ways of interlacing. Pedestrians define and realize the form of the space in which coincidences superimpose themselves. Just as the act of enunciating allows an enunciator to interiorize a linguistic system, so the act of walking allows a pedestrian to interiorize streets in towns by the demonstration of a spatial walk.\footnote{16}{Ibid., 148.} Pedestrians’ ways of walking reconstruct the original sense of urbanism; they appropriate places with names of their own to reconstruct new meanings and impregnate the town with them. This is where alternative space itself and the point of departure for the liberated area is found. The
tactic of “detachment” and “fragmentation” functions in this space. If detachment permits different points of view to penetrate the cracks in achieving the particularity of a space, then fragmentation is joined to the plurality of knowing which produces meanings that principally come from exceptional and negative things.\(^{17}\)

But a problem presents itself here because the moment when resistant otherness theorizes the indeterminable practice of resistance in tactical space, it is highly probable that it finds itself facing a paradox which damages the flexibility and indeterminability of the tactic. De Certeau’s dualist notions of strategy and tactic are not scenes of confrontation where one puts oneself in a position to counterattack. There is moreover a conceptual distinction which holds that social creativity maintains its structure in a space where heterologous elements implicated by different powers make irregular Brownian movements. The perspective on the organization of meanings and the social network which de Certeau tried to find is the expression of thought in action across the “poetics of transition and displacement”\(^{18}\) and of the “micro-upheaval” of the “double absence” (i.e., the absence of perspective on absence)\(^ {19}\); there are also the continual transition and rupture of the structure and the system at the heart of absolute space.

However, de Certeau was not interested in the establishment of camp, which is an alternative space. Why? He never admitted the absolutization of the territory of the subject, of course, but neither of the territory of the other. Consequently, even as he was interested in alternative space, he could not admit a territory proper called “camp.” The fact that the practice of writing is possible in a “non-place” could be thus understood.\(^ {20}\) Only a space of advertisement and propaganda which flow unceasingly, that is to

\(^{17}\) M. de Certeau, L’Etranger ou l’union dans la différence, 137.

\(^{18}\) Certeau, L’Invention du quotidien 1, 67.

\(^{19}\) Certeau, L’Absent de l’histoire.

\(^{20}\) Certeau, L’Invention du quotidien 1, 107, 327.
say a “site without a site,” or “camp without camp,” a space where a “guerilla without a camp” deploys himself is the space that de Certeau asked for; this is linked to his perspective on absent space.

**Absent Space: the Space of Deception and Silence, of Exile and of Secession**

What is absent space as seen by de Certeau? It is an “ethical space” where one tries to consider oneself as an other and grant oneself to the other. De Certeau extracted the source of this space from the mystical space of mystics. For him, the act of faith is not only a manner of enunciation, but also a manner of execution, and what is essential is to “practive the difference.” Across this practice, the subject of faith discovers otherness in recognizing each moment that truth exists among others. Then the reciprocal practice of the subject and the other takes place in time, not by the principle of scientific proof, but by the historic principle. Here, faith is a work which temporalizes and explains the mutual relation between the subject and the other, or opens a space of symbolic expression.

De Certeau rediscovered “apophatic theology” in paying attention to the historic puncture and rupture at the beginning of modern times; he discovered the space of the Other with his penetrating mind, which professed the “theology of expulsion.” De Certeau is the person who sought a space where a “the Other” was raised to the rank of “God.” Jean-Joseph Surin (1600-1665), a Jesuit spiritual theologian who pursued a new form of speech beyond the limits required by society and language,

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23) Panier, “Pour une anthropologie du croire,” 52-54.
24) Moingt; Bertrand.
was a mirror of de Certeau. What is more, in the “movement of permanent secession” of Jean de Labadie (1610-1674), the vagabond out to learn from the other at the exterior of all space of knowledge/power, de Certeau discovered a type of existence which followed the order of the Other (God), and which was a disappointment. Doubt and silence, exile and secession, wandering and distance from the world and the mistrust of the sacred text of mystics have enabled them to find “the space of the other” in oneself in place of the other. “What the other does not authorize is beautiful. It is that which is worthy without being given credit by the real.”

What is a mystic? It is a being who undertakes insoluble questions, and who hangs in the void for the “conserve the status quo.” “I” speaks instead of the Other, and demands a space for expression qui responds to the logos of God. But there is a problem: this space is a “fictive world which does not exist in reality.” Why? Because it is a place where the fictive subject happens, which can potentially substitute for the cosmos which serves the creator, and which expresses paradox. The figuration of fictive space is the threshold of mystical discourse.

What is the origin of the dynamic vitality of the mystical fable’s form, which creates endless new discourses? De Certeau found the vigor of mystical discourse in the discourse created by the group which seeks the logos of God not in the letter, but in pastoral nature in its support of life, which gives importance to ancient rhetoric and the prophetic voice while throwing down a challenge to the privilege of the Bible and above all at the Biblicality of the Reformation. That pastoral nature is equally

27) Certeau, La fable mystique 1, 269; Giard et al., Le voyage mystique, 87; Giard, Histoire.
28) Certeau, La fable mystique 1, 257.
29) Bogner, Gebrochen Gegenwart, 174-77.
declared not only in madness, but also in fools, while the Absolute keeps its silence.\textsuperscript{30} Mystic fable prefers modest theology, the \textit{ignorant infused with inspiration} like the wise fool. De Certeau considered mystical space the symbol of a new discourse and political identity.

According to de Certeau, absolute space, which is opposed to mystical space, is a relatively closed space where the dominant system for interpreting the world constantly develops—this is the process of reproducing \textit{scriptural writing} by re-employment of writing.\textsuperscript{31} Scriptural writing is the result of the coalition of religious and political powers in the reproduction of absolute space. De Certeau even nearly judged the French and Russian Revolutions as processes for reproducing this scriptural writing in a \textit{tabula rasa} space.\textsuperscript{32} Once the prototype of scriptural writing is established, the \textit{scriptural economy}, which is re-employed as a new strategy, begins to reproduce conformity in religion, history and tradition, as well as for capitalization.\textsuperscript{33} Additionally, mystical space was for de Certeau a territory where the \textit{alternative} scriptural economy, which understands not-knowing and is like a black market, offers a counter-interpretation of the social system.

Mystics are people who refuse assimilation to rationalism, and they put in question the absolute space of modernity, thus conveying power to otherness. They have definitely created their own isolated religious order in transforming their belief into a unique religious expression. Mystical space is where that which is excluded from the scientific domain is substituted by \textit{mystical fables}; it is a space of fetishization. Hence, there will be a “mystical science” in the space of this new and unknown knowledge.\textsuperscript{34} De Certeau envisioned the “reversal of thought,” the “revolution of belief,” the “changing of the rules” and the “suspension of

\begin{enumerate}
\item Certeau, \textit{La possession de Loudun}; “Le silence de l’absolue,” 525-46.
\item Certeau, \textit{L’ecriture de l’histoire}, 152, 165.
\item Certeau, \textit{L’invention du quotidien 1}, 201.
\item Ahearne, \textit{Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and Its Other}, 53, 57-58.
\item Certeau, “Historicites Mystiques,” 325-354.
\end{enumerate}
belief"; then, after the repetitive changes of the social and collective place which is the origin of the self, the foundational alteration or rupture opens a space in which a new form of speech is born. Described psychoanalytically by de Certeau, this is a “revolutionary space” which is found in a series of mystical texts written by those who resisted change provoked by the Church, which reinforced canonization in reaction to schism. In that sense, mystics remain exemplary revolutionaries.

The mystics tried to achieve a mystical space like a black market that offers a counter-interpretation to the traditional social system via mystical acts in social space, i.e., the temporary redistribution of space. Mysticism is often simplistically perceived as un-political, but in reality it is an expression of the historic consciousness that codifies the critique of the politically dominant space. However, not all of mysticism’s results are politically practiced. The essential practice of mystical faith was fundamentally limited to the use of language rhetorically or tactically. Mystical language was filed with explications and debates, and was no longer the criteria for a universal interpretation in terms of linguistic order and of meaning. For de Certeau, the essence of the act of belief consists of the act which one performs with the Other, and that act is at the heart of social space. But mystical belief remains at the level of “speaking,” which is far from real practice. Consequently, it maintains its limit in remaining uniquely like a belief and like mores.

Nevertheless, the anti-rationalism of mystics offered de Certeau another practical signification. He was deceived during May 1968 by the rational evolutionism of the leaders of government, the political

35) Certeau, La culture au pluriel, 20, 131.
36) Certeau, La faibless de croire, 183-226.
37) Certeau, La fable mystique I, 30; Le lieu de l’autre, 23.
39) On the struggle of discourses in May ’68, see Certeau, La prise de parole: Pour une nouvelle culture; La prise de parole et autres écrits politique, 40, 64; La culture au pluriel, 11.
parties and the unions, which were in a state of practical ineffectiveness. He experienced anxiety from it, since if their acts of political defiance increased, it would have a direct bad influence on revolutionary movements and on revolt. Moreover, he worried just as much since this phenomenon could lead the people to no longer have confidence in belief. In that sense, however, it was not completely wrong if it qualified as anti-Enlightenment. De Certeau lamented the loss of confidence and the growth of resistance from political and religious institutions, and tried to overthrow the management of the established scientific evolutionary revolt movement. He declared the ethical turning of space where a universal other of everyday life which refuses subjectivity practices revolutionary value that is sympathetic to a new form across “absent space,” where it finds itself prey to silence, expulsion, secession and frustration. But absent space keeps to its limits as mystical space by remaining uniquely at the level of “speaking,” which is far from real practice. As a result, it is a tactical space rather than an independent alternative space, and it corrupts the weak points of stray space.

Conclusion: de Certeau, a Vagabond without End

De Certeau’s works, which are characterized by geomorphological non-determinability marked out by “rupture,” “friction,” “puncture” and “disagreement,” explain the production and reproduction of space. His “stories of space” involving “spatial turning,” which superimpose themselves by the method of “linguistic turning,” are not reconstructed in a globally coherent system. They are also fragmented in a manner that is micro-discursive and takes the form of performative narratives. In them, de Certeau critiqued absolute space, which violently “conceptualizes” the

other to conform with its power, and directed his research to the field of “heterology” in a “non-violent” discourse and a stray space of dispersed decentralization where there are different others coexisting. This stray space is an alternative one which seeks a new space for revolt; it is not systematic and flows unceasingly, that is to say it is a space where a “micro-upheaval without camp” extends itself. He demanded the “activation of thought” for a space where everyday practice combatting cunning could be found, without avoiding control and supervision.

Yet de Certeau even subverted the originality of alternative space, and foresaw an absent space where a non-place of frustration, silence, expulsion and secession could be realized. Absent space is a space of the Other, but it is also a space where neither the territory of the other or of the self becomes absolute. With its sympathy for the Other, the absent space sought by de Certeau is a complementary space serving as an antidote to revolutionary rationalism impregnated with scientific positivism. For de Certeau, absent space encompasses an *ethical turning* which reflects on otherness, and is a space perspective that surpasses the limits of social scientific evolutionism.

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