

PRACTICING ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES : READING PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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This exercise sprang from an interest I share with Michel de Certeau, the impulse to take an interdisciplinary approach to studies of history. De Certeau indulged, to quote Burke, in everything from psychoanalysis to politics of language to the role of 'consumption as production' in French daily life."¹ *The Practice of Everyday Life*², the book which pushed me into this tutorial, is a unique blend of different disciplines as eclectic as history, sociology, economics, literature, literary criticism, philosophy, religion and most importantly, anthropology. Moreover, de Certeau studies a wide range of themes, from train rides to city walks to Indian customs to reading, narration and writing to epistemological foundations of scientific discourse, sometimes analyzing, sometimes describing and at other times theorizing or simply telling a story. The book criticizes the existing parameters of cultural studies, redefines rationality and deplores the constraints set up by language. I intend to locate de Certeau's position in the Annales School through an analysis of this particular book. Then I propose to chalk out what I think to be an example, albeit apparently unconnected, of de Certeau's influence on modern social science - the development of cricket writing in India. This will help to examine de Certeau's relevance to disciplines still outside the ambit of mainstream history, a category he ardently vouched for in his work.

De Certeau points out a serious deficiency of existing social studies, in that while it adequately covers all aspects of mass culture viz. art, symbols, language, traditions, it is cramped by the absence of any theoretical means to scrutinize how people reappropriate them in everyday situations. This gap is more gaping since the existing tenets of cultural studies fail to understand how ordinary people adapt the rituals the governing institutions try to impose on them, and in turn subvert their authority. Negligence of the creative agency and the subconscious struggle of common people reduces the latter to passive consumers of institutionalized practices for constructing commonalty. Social science is a stereotypical portrayal of active producers and passive consumers, the one who produce and propose and the other who receive uncomplainingly. De Certeau explodes the myth of this 'consumer', and empowers this group identity as 'user', who operate within and

¹ Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, pp. 80-81

² First published in French in 1974 and made available in English translation, by Steven F. Randall and Luce Girard along with John Miles, in 1984.