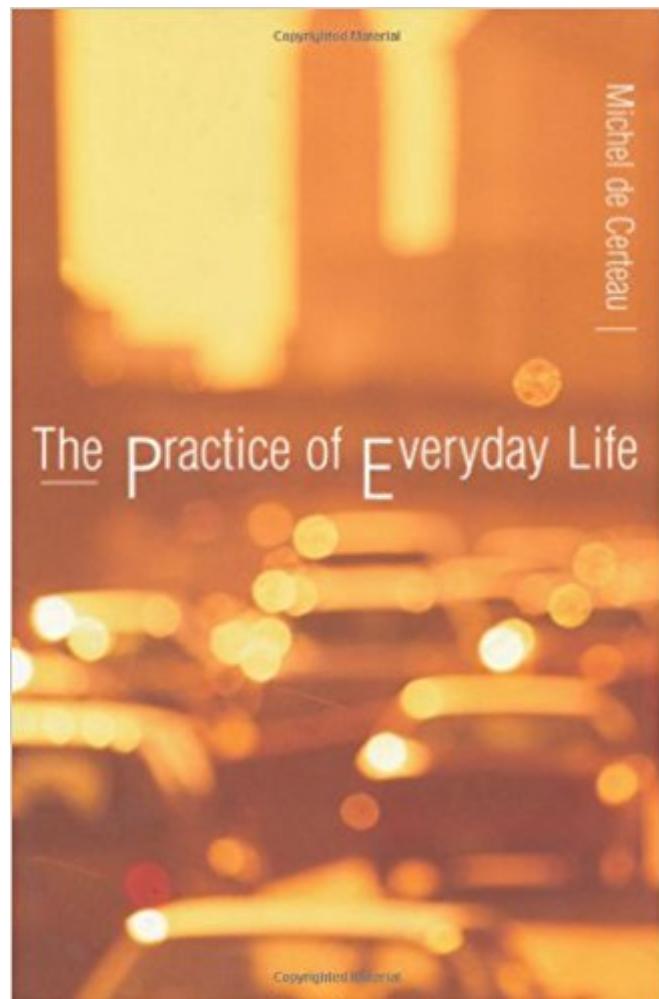


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The Practice Of Everyday Life



Synopsis

Michel de Certeau considers the uses to which social representation and modes of social behavior are put by individuals and groups, describing the tactics available to the common man for reclaiming his own autonomy from the all-pervasive forces of commerce, politics, and culture. In exploring the public meaning of ingeniously defended private meanings, de Certeau draws brilliantly on an immense theoretical literature in analytic philosophy, linguistics, sociology, semiology, and anthropology--to speak of an apposite use of imaginative literature.

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Customer Reviews

Sometimes I am simply proud that I have read a book. This slim volume falls into that category. The fourteen short chapters explode with new ideas, fresh perspectives, and tantalizing viewpoints. To summarize these riches is unlikely to do them justice, yet I will try. De Certeau inverts social values and cultural hierarchies. His hero metaphor is not the exemplar, but rather the ant. Wisdom resides not in the pronouncement of expert or philosopher, but in the routine discourse between ordinary people. To De Certeau the definitional constraints imposed by the experts result in artificial distinctions. Only the discourse of ordinary people is firmly rooted in experience and embraces the varieties and logical complexities of living. Among these complexities of life is the amazing adaptive capacity of the ordinary. Even the most oppressive and controlling of cultures cannot eradicate the subversive agency of the peasant. This subversive agency is expressed through mythic stories, common proverbs, and verbal tricks. De Certeau refers to the adaptive capacity of the ordinary as

tactics of living, and these tactics may be best exemplified when the worker does the personal while on the clock. The distinction between strategy and tactics is central to De Certeau's thought. Strategy refers to the top-down exercise of power to coerce compliance. Tactics refer to the opportunistic manipulations offered by circumstance. The conflict between strategies and tactics is ironic - as strategic forces expand to increase dominance, there is a corresponding increase in opportunity for tactical subversion.

Michel de Certeau's brilliant book is one of the primary nodes in the historical switchbox that eventually crossed the signals that led us through structuralism and practice theory to critical realism and Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things. His classic exploration of everyday life will send flashes of light and pleasure through the mind on a constant basis - his dense, absolutely masterful, and witty expository quasi-poetry on economy, power, and practice is essentially an extended series of aphorisms, upon any one of which an entire essay could be based. And a good one, at that. What we have here is a celebration of the everyday, the common, the mundane, and the wonderful capacity of life to resist systematization and classification via its organic flexibility and esprit de corps. It is a wonderful wake-up call: "A few individuals, after having long considered themselves experts speaking a scientific language, have finally awoken from their slumbers and suddenly realized that for the last few moments they have been walking on air, like Felix the Cat in the old cartoons, far from the scientific ground. Though legitimized by scientific knowledge, their discourse is seen to have been no more than the ordinary language of tactical games between economic powers and symbolic authorities." Writing in the tradition of Lefebvre (more so than anyone else who comes to mind at the moment), his work touches upon contemporary Foucault and Bourdieu only briefly and then moves on to do much more. For example, in the way of analyses of strategic and tactical behavior, resistances, spatial practices, subaltern hermeneutics, and state/scientific ideologies of secrecy and knowledge.

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