

Michel de Montaigne's Contributions to Cultural Anthropology

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Received 17 October 2015; accepted 23 October 2015
Published online 26 October 2015

Abstract

Modern cultural anthropology was not established until the 19th century. But some of the basic questions in cultural anthropology about man and culture were discussed by the precursors of the field. Questions such as why peoples and their cultures are different and how these differences should be dealt with. In this article the author posits that Michel de Montaigne has made significant contributions to the questions and the notions of man and culture in cultural anthropology. Drawing on Montaigne's major essays "Of Experience," "Of Customs," "Of Coaches," and "Of Cannibals," the author demonstrates that Montaigne is a strong believer in understanding and evaluating an individual culture in its own context. His beliefs are grounded in his epistemological skepticism and his views of reason, experience, difference, resemblance, customs, man, culture, and nature. Expanding the discussion of Montaigne's concepts of man and culture in the context of some relevant cultural approaches in modern cultural anthropology, the author argues that Montaigne may be well associated with the cultural pluralist approach in anthropology.

Key words: Michel de Montaigne; Reason; Experience; Resemblance; Custom, Man; Culture; Nature

Liu, Z. (2015). Michel de Montaigne's Contributions to Cultural Anthropology. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 11(10), 1-4. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/7702> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7702>

INTRODUCTION

As a division of anthropology, cultural anthropology studies various aspects of cultures for diverse peoples of

the world. Although cultural anthropology as a discipline was not established until 19th century, the fundamental questions it deals with, such as the cultural variation of humans in terms of their customs, and social, economic, and political institutions, were asked by thinkers far before the rise of the discipline. This paper attempts to demonstrate how Michel de Montaigne has contributed to the development of ideas in cultural anthropology. It focuses on the concepts of man and culture expressed in Michel de Montaigne's essays. It argues that, as a literary writer and philosopher, Montaigne has exerted a great influence on the ideas of man and culture. He should be remembered as a humanist, who advocates the value of cultural pluralism. Montaigne's influence on the development of the ideas of man and culture has been readily acknowledged either in the history of cultural studies or in social/cultural anthropology. By and large, Montaigne's notions of man and culture are closely related to his epistemology which is rooted in skepticism. Both Murray Leaf and Annemarie de Waal Malefijt have traced Montaigne's philosophy back to skeptic tradition (Leaf, 1979, p.32; Malefijt, 1974, pp.46-47). By the same token, John Honigmann (1976, p.58) sees a connection of Montaigne's stance on culture to his skepticism, stating "With Pyrrho, the Greek skeptic, he [Montaigne] doubts whether absolute standards can possibly be applied in intercultural relations".

The purpose of the present paper is three-fold. First, I would like to discuss Montaigne's ideas of man and culture in relation to his epistemology, which finds expression in his critique of reason, experience, difference, and resemblance. Second, I attempt to examine the dialectic between Montaigne's epistemology and his notions of customs, man, culture, and nature. Third, I will try to explore the significance of discussing Montaigne's ideas of man and culture by extending the discussion in the context of some relevant approaches in modern cultural anthropology.

1. MONTAIGNE'S CRITIQUE OF REASON, EXPERIENCE, DIFFERENCE, AND RESEMBLANCE

As has been pointed out, Montaigne's ideas of man and culture are related to his epistemological skepticism. In his essays, Montaigne rekindles the arguments for skepticism in Western philosophy. This tradition can be dated far back to the ancient Greek philosophy. When Heraclitus says that one cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon him, he is already raising some fundamental questions in philosophy: The concept of flux of time and space, the sense of change of things and the relationship between the parts and the whole. Implied in this saying is another question: How can we know the truth in the changing universe through our experience? As a skeptic, Montaigne believes in the limitations of individuals' reason and experience, the difficulty of individuals' rising above these limitations to attain the ultimate truth, the constant change in both object and subject, and the diversity of value-judgment. As De Ley (1985, pp.28-29) points out, Montaigne adopts a critical attitude towards reason, experience, difference, and resemblance to his writings. For Montaigne, experience leads one to no final judgment. Every experience used in support of an argument itself involves another experience, and the process could go on endlessly. Since human beings differ in their opinions, and the world is continually changing and shifting, there is nothing absolutely fixed and invariable in terms of methodology. One may think that his judgements based on experience are right and valuable, but other people may think the same way. The number of differences in experience and the physical world is so great that it is hard for individuals to acquire the ultimate truth of their own. As Montaigne (2003) declares in the opening of "Of Experience":

There is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge. We try all the ways that can lead us to it. When reason fails us, we use experience...which is a weaker and less dignified means. But truth is so great a thing that we must not disdain any medium that will lead us to it. Reason has so many shapes that we know not which to lay hold of; experience has no fewer. The inference that we try to draw from the resemblance of events is uncertain, because they are always dissimilar: there is no quality so universal in this aspect of things as diversity and variety....Resemblance does not make things so much alike as difference make them unlike. Nature has committed herself to make nothing separate that was not different. (pp. 992-993)

This passage best summarizes Montaigne's skeptical epistemology, which serves as a critique of individuals' reason, experience, difference, and resemblance. Without denying the existence of truth, he warns against obtaining truth through biased methods or draw general conclusions through one's own experience, as it is always limited to unique, individual circumstances.

2. MONTAIGNE'S NOTIONS OF CUSTOMS, MAN, CULTURE, AND NATURE

Montaigne's epistemology and his views on customs, man, culture, and nature form a dialectical whole. Customs may be individual and cultural. In "Of Experience" Montaigne describes in detail his personal habits or customs, which are part of the content of his vast experience. He reminds us how frequently these customs are different from others'. His discussion of the cultural customs shows that people live in a world of customs, to which they attribute a moral or natural character which they intrinsically possess. These customs can be transformed into dogma and even lead to autocracy. As Montaigne (2003) remarks, "You make a German sick if you put him to bed on a mattress, like an Italian on a feather bed, and a Frenchman without curtains and a fire. A Spaniard's stomach cannot stand our way of eating, nor can ours stand to drink Swiss fashion" (p.1008). To Montaigne (2003), since people's thinking processes differ, they tend to justify or rationalize arbitrary and cultural concepts, taking what is individually and culturally specific to be universal. "In short, each nation has many customs and usages that are not only unknown, but savage and miraculous, to some other nation" (p.1009).

Montaigne (2003) makes a similar observation in "Of Customs, and Not Easily Changing an Accepted Law": "But the principal effect of the power of custom is to seize and ensnare us in such a way that it is hardly within our power to get ourselves back out of its grip and return into ourselves to reflect and reason about its ordinances. In truth, because we drink them with our milk from birth, and because the face of the world presents itself in this aspect to our first view, it seems that we are born on condition of following this course. And the common notions that we find in credit around us and infused into our soul by our fathers' seed, these seem to be the universal and natural ones. Whence it comes to pass that what is off the hinges of custom, people believe to be off the hinges of reason: God knows how unreasonably, most of the time" (p.100). The passage quoted above seems to suggest that an individual may not be as rational as he thinks so, if he considers individual ideas that come to him via custom as universal. Each of us is governed by customs, which influence our understanding of the world. So we tend to judge others in our terms. This example shows Montaigne's critique of the biased notion of man. Judging by our own customs, we often tend to think that others, being different, are less valuable.

In the essay "Of Cannibals," Montaigne describes his encounter with an Indian from the coast of Brazil and what he has learnt from him about the people in the New World. In this essay, Montaigne introduces his idea of primitivism and savagery, which suggest in advance the idea of the noble savage advanced by Rousseau and other

Romanticists. According to him, these native Brazilians are considered primitive only because their customs are different from others'. As he comments: "I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. There is always the perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect and accomplished manners in all things" (Montaigne, 2003, p.185). Montaigne's notions of man and culture suggest that the customs of one culture are as equally valuable as those of others, each having reason of its own existence. Interested in the natural aspect of man, Montaigne is not hesitant to express his favor for the cultural simplicity and naturalness of the native Brazilians. "Those people are wild, just as we call wild the fruits that Nature has produced by herself and in her normal course; whereas really it is those that we have changed artificially and led astray from the common order, that we should rather call wild" (Ibid.). "These nations, then, seem to me barbarous in this sense, that they have been fashioned very little by the human mind, and are still very close to their original" (Ibid.).

In another essay "Of Coaches," Montaigne contrasts nature with artificiality which he believes is ingrained in the knowledge an individual acquires: "There is nothing unique and rare as regards nature, but there certainly is as regards our knowledge, which is a miserable foundation for our rules and which is apt to represent to us a very false picture of things" (Ibid., p.841). To Montaigne, nature means infinitude, variety, freedom, spontaneity, and simplicity, hence "nothing unique and rare," whereas art is limited, narrow, rigid, sophisticated, and unnatural. One's limitation of experience and understanding makes it difficult to obtain the ultimate truth of the changing universe by him. What one gets through his knowledge reflects a greater part of his ignorance, as nothing in nature is stable and constant, all being subject to change and flux. Here Montaigne offers his sharp warning against making judgements based on artificially acquired knowledge, describing their cause as "miserable" and the effects they bring about as "very false." He seems to imply that one's attempt to judge others by criteria derived from his own customs is arbitrary. Indeed, many examples in the essay support his position. Seasickness may be due to different reasons; and coaches may have a variety of functions, and be drawn by anything imaginable from stags to ostriches.

Montaigne's view on customs, man, culture, and nature are echoed by later scholars in cultural studies. Commenting on Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals," Edmund Leach, a British social anthropologist, recognizes its historical significance in anthropology. Though Leach withholds the overall judgment of Montaigne's egalitarian paradise, he commends Montaigne for enlarging the concept of man and provoking people to begin thinking

seriously about the moral nature of mankind as a whole (Leach, 1982, p.68). Similarly, Honigmann (1976) admits Montaigne's influence on anthropology, claiming that his idea of savagery or primitivism "got fashioned in later anthropology" (p.58). Not quite convinced by the sharp distinction that Montaigne draws between the customs of small-scale and civilized societies, Honigmann (1976) comments, "the fault is trifling compared with the enormity of the vision he [Montaigne] shared with his audience: of a striking different world following strange conventions that nevertheless possess a morality and logic of their own" (p.59). Margaret Hodgen (1964) also has observed that Montaigne's descriptions of the customs of the native Brazilians "were new and fresh in spirit," and "they contained a wholesome attempt to adhere to facts, and to abstain from traditional moralizing or vituperation" (p.193).

3. MONTAIGNE AND SOME APPROACHES IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Montaigne's notions of man and culture are reflected in the tension between cultural universalism and cultural pluralism in modern cultural anthropology. The former involves a generalization from numerous examples that predicate cross-cultural rules, whereas the latter relies on the interpretation of a cultural practice in its uniqueness. On the one side of the spectrum stand the evolutionists. The nineteenth-century evolutionists hold that human societies everywhere evolve or progress along the same lines and this evolution follows the same pattern from savagery through barbarism to civilization (Kaplan & Manners, 1972, pp.38-42). The underlying theme of this theory is that a gradually increasing knowledge goes hand in hand with the development of human culture. The classical evolutionist approach has been expanded and refined by the neo-evolutionists who believe that cultures evolve progressively and that this progress is attributed to material and technological factors (Ibid., p.46).

On the other side of the spectrum are several groups. One of them is the functionalists. Another group is called historical particularists. In addition, Clifford Geertz, a scholar of symbolic anthropology, represents the major figure in the interpretative approach in anthropology. In response to the question of how societies differ, the functionalist Bronisław Malinowski believes that every society has a basic set of recurrent patterns of behavior or institutions, which are functional in the sense that they satisfy certain social needs (Ibid., p.56). Malinowski's influential phrase "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" has been recognized as one of the main missions in ethnography (Ibid., p.23). While Malinowski focuses on the institutional basis of society, Alfred Redcliffe-Brown stresses its structural basis—the pattern of behavior that

leads to the maintenance of stability or social cohesion within a society (Ibid., p.56). The distinction between the evolutionists and the functionalists is obvious. The evolutionists try to explain discrete culture traits in a way that is governed by the standards of certain cultures, whereas the functionalists tend to make intensive examination of distinct societies. This change in itself encourages the interpretation of beliefs and customs in terms of indigenous systems of meaning.

The historical particularists headed by the American anthropologist Franz Boas also favor the pluralist approach. To Boas, the evolutionary theories of the origins of culture are speculative. Instead, he advocates meticulous and detailed fieldwork that aims at examining the cultures and histories of particular peoples. He takes a special historical view of culture, in which "all cultures are made up of traits and trait complexes which are the product of environmental conditions, psychological factors, and historical connections" (Ibid., p.71). It seems that Montaigne's legacy in cultural anthropology is in line with the historical particularist school which believes in understanding individual cultures in their histories and contexts.

On the other hand, Clifford Geertz, the principal advocate of symbolic anthropology in America, takes an interpretative approach. From Geertz's interpretative perspective, culture is not a thoroughly integrated whole, but rather a collection of contradictory emotions, beliefs, and rules. The cultural meaning of rituals, myths, and kinships depends on how they are actually used in the context of social life. As Geertz (1973) remarks in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, "As interworked systems of construable signs...culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligently—that is, thickly—described" (p.14). Thus Geertz's approach to culture is interpretative instead of making fixed patterns of behavior through observation, abstraction, and theoretical inference. What he interprets is "the flow of social discourse," and the purpose of the interpretation is "to rescue the 'said' of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms" (Geertz, 1973, p.20). Since Geertz believes culture is charged with symbols and meanings, the whole point of his approach is "to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can...converse with them" (Ibid., p.24). The cultural interpretation is intrinsically incomplete, and what we can do is "guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory connections from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape" (Ibid., p.20). Geertz's interpretation theory is reminiscent of Montaigne's remarks on the variety of experiences and their limitations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in this paper I have attempted to discuss Montaigne's notions of man and culture embodied in his essays. I have explored the question of how Montaigne's advocacy of cultural pluralism is related to his epistemology. Furthermore, I have examined the significance of Montaigne's notions of man and culture in relation to the fundamental difference between contrasting cultural theories in modern cultural anthropology.

As mentioned above, it seems that Montaigne's critique of reason, experience, difference, and resemblance, and his notions of man, customs, culture, and nature fit into the groups that take the pluralist stance in cultural anthropology. In a way the discussion is a question of communicability in a dialog. If we take the interaction between "I" and "other" or one culture and another culture as a communicative act, this act involves a question of validity claim. The cultural universalist group believes that there are fixed standards in the dialog, and very often the standards are constructed by one's experience through which one judges things. Nevertheless, the cultural pluralist group, with which Montaigne is associated, is generally adaptive and flexible. They believe that there are a variety of traits in cultures. An individual culture is as valuable as the rest of the world. The relationship between the individual culture and the rest of the world is dialogue and dynamic, each setting the conditions for the other's existence and development, each undergoing change, reconstruction, and transformation, thus making the human communication going on.

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