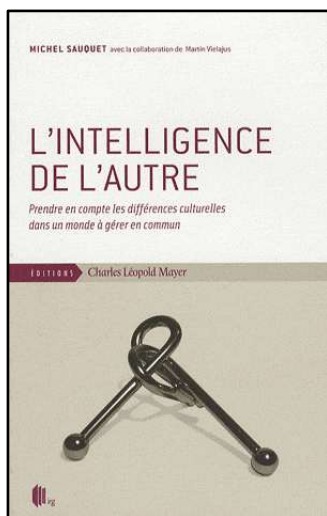


Sauquet, Michel, *L'intelligence de l'autre: Prendre en compte les différences culturelles dans un monde à gérer en commune*

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Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at www.diversophy.com



To assume, it has been said, makes an *ass* out of *u* and *me*. While this play on words doesn't travel well outside anglophone circles, it was Heidegger who affirmed that the thing we see least clearly is the pair of glasses we wear, giving rise to the now hackneyed metaphor of the "cultural lenses" we look through when we see others from our own cultural perspective. What about the lenses through which we view culture itself? Hmm...never paid attention to that... Michel Sauquet asks us to look beyond our kit of certitudes, echoing André Gide, "*Tout est dans le regard, non pas dans la chose regardée.*"¹ (Everything is in how you look, not in the thing you are looking at).

How do we understand otherness? Not through the cliches that we tag others with, not the peculiar social niceties, but through the intentions by which we and they proceed, though stereotypes may be useful, if only for the refutations they generate. Sauquet, early on, works his way through the babble of labels we use to talk about cultural processes and work.

Sauquet's book can be a bridge from where we are to where we are going. To widen our perspective, he questions the existence of an intercultural science as such and lists at least twenty professional fields that are directly engaged with culture. He joins the fray in attacking the exaggeration of cultural differences in fixed and universalistic terms. Yes, there are elements in the unconscious that stamp our character and behavior, but it is the creation of cultures and cultural units for commercial and ideological ends that furnish the focus for his examination of culture and globalization. Are we being bulldozed by US Western commercial culture, at least in the half of the world that is urbanized? If the world is listening however, it is listening in its own manner and synergizing what it hears in its own local way. So, reverse cultural flows are also taking place.

A substantial armamentum of intercultural management tools has been brought into existence over the last half century, not only in commerce, but also in governmental, NGO and religious organizations; many of them with a view toward encouraging uniformization of practices. In contrast, the author reviews strategies for coping with steamroller globalisation. One sees mentalities and strategies of defense. There are barriers of cement and barbed wire and military patrols separating states and peoples. Defense of cultural heritage by such institutions as UNESCO whose challenge is to avoid the risk of making museum pieces out of what should be living and creative patrimony. The defense of language and local media is even more challenging in a world awash in English. "Monoculture," a term borrowed from agriculture where a single crop edges out biodiversity, can also be applied elsewhere, e.g., the ecology of knowledge. Multicultural dialoging occurs on many level, between religions, in multinational armed forces, NGOs, unions and in national efforts to work with multiculturalism. The author describes seven approaches taken by governments to manage their diverse populations. In making decisions in these fields the paradoxical challenges lie in developing a kind of doubt or line of questioning that does not prevent having convictions; sustaining a patience that does not preclude action.

The second part of the book, starting with Chapter Three focuses on how we find out about the culture of the other and become aware of others' frames of reference. The author signals tradition and modernity as

¹ *Les nourritures terrestres*

polarities wondering whether their tension will be resolved by simply not paying attention to each other, or in fact will come to complement each other, or simply battle it out. Unlike too many intercultural treatises, his treatment gives appropriate recognition to the role of religion in the shaping of culture, not simply historically but today, and deals not simply with the major religions, but with the embedded varieties of local beliefs that may not only shape individual and social behavior but governments as well.

There is the question of how much modernity is trapped in the system of Western thinking with the colonialism that it implies, and how modernity is struggling to find other expressions. Just as the concept of *terra nullius* gave free reign to the European settlement of the Americas, it has become normal for the Western mind to see a seemingly unoccupied space as virgin, a void asking to be filled with Western ideas and institutions, assuming that no local activity, thinking or forms of governance exist or are valid.

How does or should the past influence the present, what guideposts are there to provide for our identity and activity day after day? Should nationality, for example, be viewed, as it commonly is in the West, as providing an identity for the individual, or is it something over and above the numbers of individuals who make up the nation? Categorization of societies into individualistic and collectivistic ones may have been overplayed, however when, how, where, and with whom one says "I" instead of "we" shows substantial variance among groups of users. Interestingly, the author points out that the phrase, "Thank you," is characteristic of societies where a common sense of mutual sharing does not prevail. Colonial history is rewritten so that our teeth are not set on edge by the sour grapes that our ancestors pillaged from foreign vineyards.

Where does religion fit in this picture? Do we underestimate its influence? Again it is not just a matter of established religion, but of the penetration of religion into various arenas of life. While the USA claims to separate church and state, it has long generated a form of secular Christian religiosity even in the public sphere, or perhaps especially so there. Are we in the midst of a religious revival? It seems so, not only in the Muslim world but varieties of fundamentalism and sects springing up all about, and a vestigial practices bearing elements of religion are part of the lives often of people who themselves do not recognize the fact.

Chapter Four addresses the relationship of nature to culture, how one's view of the earth or the universe is played out. Do we take the natural world as ours to dominate and exploit? Are we in some way one with it, in a symbiotic relationship? The author provides examples of each of these relationship types, what is likely to happen when they come face-to-face with each other, and how our diverse ideas of relating to the world will play out in the environment. This is a challenge not resolved by deciding for one worldview over another, nor is it the case that so-called "symbiotic and traditional" societies have left the earth unscarred.

Time is the topic of Chapter Five, seen in the framework of contemporary globalization. Such simple things as past, present, and future are not necessarily the terms in which all cultures see time. In particular, how much the future is envisioned and spoken about is fraught with consequences for behavior and for our best intended projects. Time, linear, spiral or circular, fixed or elastic, agricultural or urban, on a one way passage or eternally returning, monochronic or polychronic, all have their meanings and nuances and often their rituals as well.

Chapter Six discusses the relationship to work and money and begins with an etymological discussion of how culturally work can be seen as *travail* (torture) or (a) *work* dignifying the person and God. Hence the distinctions between working to live and living to work in the West are based on religious differences. Other cultures will have other views. This author moves on to discuss how activity is related to goals, being vs. doing, and the choice of employment.

Chapter Seven concerns relationships in society and particularly at work, first that of equality and hierarchy, a la Hofstede in generic terms with a look at traditional roles in Chinese society and in the castes of India. Then, a look at the levels of privacy or separation of work and personal life, the roles of age and

gender, how accountability is regarded as well as how honor and prestige are distributed. Knowledge and knowhow play a role at various levels of society, however, these may not coordinate with levels of formal education in various cultures, such as they strongly do in France, for example.

The third part of the book focuses on language and words. Without diminishing the quality of the rest of the book, it is here where the treatment really stands out both theoretically and in terms of Sauquet's own rich linguistic experience. He starts by discussing about how people communicate, the interplay of words with each other and with silence, overstatement and understatement, understandings and misunderstandings. Sidestepping the technicalities of linguists and translators, the author poses and discusses five questions regarding the reliability of translation, the architecture of language, the ability to think in another language; he asks whether intercultural communication occur in the spoken or written word and, how are written and oral communication and agreements valued from one tongue to another.

What then of political discourse? How do we analyse and deconstruct it, paying attention to the semantic applications, instabilities and impasses involved? This is the focus of Chapter Nine, which continues the previous chapter's discussion of linguistic and cultural interplay. He explores how the word "democracy" common to many tongues finds a plethora of interpretations outside the framework of Western civil society; likewise notions of the state and its relationships to what we call civil society and citizenship itself. Here the specific meanings of these entities often shade off into abstractions to the point where the author speaks of "the myth of modern citizenship." Though, in our contemporary Western mindset, it is bound with a sense of universal democratic participation, historically citizenship has meant and today means many things by nation and region. In the exercise of citizenship for example, is decision taken by public processes of consensus seeking or by majority vote on a secret ballot. Are we capable of examining these as cultural preferences and admitting their forms of (il)legitimacy?

In a brief conclusion, the Sauquet revisits his intentions for this book. He wishes to point out how we live in a tension between similarities and differences, and how differences, far from being viewed as negative, can become the prime matter in which we learn not just about ourselves and our reflexes, but a place where "roots become routes". Treelike they grow and multiply and entangle in a way that prevents us insisting too strongly on the uniqueness of our origins. The author elucidates three principles resulting from some three years of seminar exploration of these issues, leading up to the redaction of this volume.

First is to *recognize our natural tendency to focus on our own "belly button."* Secondly, *putting knowing how to be (savoir-être) before knowing how to act (savoir-faire).* He calls the latter "an attitude, involving intelligence about the other, prudence, curiosity and respect; without these our cultures will never meet." The final principle is *doubt*, letting questions remain questions, allowing ourselves to be blown away by the unexpected, seeing the paradoxes within our own judgements about cultures in a world where adaptation, change and hybridization take place both in the short and long term running up against our own tendencies to moralize and want to correct.

The book concludes with an annexed set of fifty questions arising from the treatment of the material in each of the chapters. These questions are useful both for studying a society as well as to guide the curiosity and observations of outsiders and newcomers. They are posed not as an analytic tool per se, but as a kind of checklist, a matrix to keep in the back of one's mind when embarking on sojourns into worlds not one's own, realizing that our interlocutors may prioritize these same questions differently.

The bibliography is excellently done, providing organization by topic as well as including useful commentary. Information is given to locate and access existing libraries and resources.

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