

## Culture



**Tzvetan TODOROV, *La Conquête de l'Amérique : la question de l'autre*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1982. 284 pages, 75 FF — The Conquest of America, New York, Harper and Row, 1985. 288 pages**

Dominique Legros

Volume 5, Number 2, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078314ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078314ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Legros, D. (1985). Review of [Tzvetan TODOROV, *La Conquête de l'Amérique : la question de l'autre*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1982. 284 pages, 75 FF — The Conquest of America, New York, Harper and Row, 1985. 288 pages]. *Culture*, 5(2), 117–121. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078314ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1985

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**Érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Tzvetan TODOROV, *La Conquête de l'Amérique: la question de l'autre*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1982. 284 pages, 75 FF.

— *The Conquest of America*, New York, Harper and Row, 1985. 288 pages.

By Dominique Legros  
Concordia University

The Japanese know a form of art which is truly fascinating. It consists in cutting, slitting and folding a piece of crepe paper following an intricate plan. When the last fold is made, the paper is reduced to a tiny ball, the size of a small pill. With great precautions, the artist then places this ball on the perfectly still surface of a cup of water. Naturally, the paper absorbs water and the ball swells. At this point, a small wonder happens. Slowly the paper unfolds itself, and just as slowly there rise above the water either the walls, then the roofs of a miniature oriental temple or the rocks, the trees, and the small bridges of a Japanese garden.

*La conquête de l'Amérique: la question de l'autre*, provides an experience quite akin to that of this ancient art form. Its raw material is the history of the first century of the discovery, conquest and colonization of Mesoamerica by the Spanish. Using Herodotus as a model, Todorov lets it unfold, in storytelling fashion, in the form of brief anecdotes, each followed by a maxim. At first, the stories are the only captivating part of the text; the morals drawn from each one seem almost trivial. But as maxims accumulate one starts to sense that they follow each other according to a carefully pre-established plan. And, slowly, there emerges out of the storytelling of the conquest of Mexico a totally unexpected address on the effects of contacts with foreign cultures, on their dangers and benefits, on what one should know about them, and, as well, an intriguing thesis on the historical evolution of humanity's abilities to deal with the other, with *alterity*.

What one should know about contacts with foreign cultures is, according to Todorov, essentially this: there are no necessary links between *not* knowing the other and despising him, between loving him and knowing him, between knowing him and respecting him; a positive response to alterity may go together with one or several extremely negative ones.

To make his point, he distinguishes three domains of inquiry. The first is the domain of value judgments: the other is bad or good; I do not, or I do, like him. The second is the domain of action

toward the other: I make the other's values mine; I am neutral or indifferent; or I impose my values, on the other, I force him to assimilate mine. The third is the domain of knowledge: I am ignorant of the other's identity or I know it. He then makes us observe the behaviour of heroes and villains in the history of the conquest of Mexico in each of these domains.

On the plane of love there is a continuum of behaviour. The worst consists in a total indifference, which leads to cold murders, far more frightening than Camus' *crime gratuit* in *l'Étranger*, or in a total disdain or repugnance toward what is sacred to the other. It is illustrated by the attitudes of the average *conquistadores* and of some priests. Two examples: "Some Christians met an Indian holding a child in her arms and nursing him; as the dog they had with them was hungry, one of them seized the child from its mother's arms and threw it to the pet. The baby was torn to pieces and eaten alive in front of its mother." In 1549, Diego de Landa, a Franciscan, was sent to Yucatán to Christianize the Indians. During the next fourteen years he jailed Indians and tortured or executed them on the slightest sign of "hereticism." He also sought all the copies of the Maya holy books, seized and burnt them. The best attitude consists in a true feeling of brotherhood with the other. Las Casas, a Dominican, is the only example available. He did sincerely hold that the Indians were in all respects the equals of the Spanish, and he actively protected Indians from exactions.

On the plane of action, Todorov distinguishes among three types of behaviour. The first consists in making the other's values one's own. None of the above-mentioned figures adopted it, not even Las Casas. Yet this behaviour is not merely a hypothetical case. A certain Guerrero was shipwrecked along the coast of Mexico some years before Cortés discovered the area. He learned the local language, started to dress and decorate himself like his hosts, and slowly climbed the ladder of social status among them. When Cortés discovered Guerrero and asked him to join him as his interpreter, the man declined. Later Guerrero led the wars which his Indian hosts conducted against their Spanish invaders, and he was finally killed by his former countrymen. His whole attitude could have been totally different. Another man had survived the same shipwreck. Cortés also requested him to join the *conquistadores*. This second man did not hesitate a moment, and became one of Cortés' main interpreters.

The second type of behaviour is also the most common. It consists in imposing one's own values on the other. Many illustrations are given by

Todorov. For example, if one distinguishes between two parts in Las Casas' life (roughly from 1484 to 1550 and from 1550 to 1566), the young Las Casas falls into this second category. During this period, in spite of his love for the Indians, he did all he could to convert them, and he justified on religious grounds their colonization by the Spanish. Diego de Landa, the Franciscan sent to Yucatán, Diego Duran, a Dominican, and Bernardino de Sahagun, another Franciscan (the last two wrote scholarly descriptions of the Mexican cultures) also took the same attitude. Cabeza de Vaca, another early shipwrecked man who knew the Indian cultures very well, Cortés, and all the other *conquistadores*, equally belong to this group. These individuals differed only on how much force should be used to impose one's worldview. Lay and religious groups were equally split. Most *conquistadores*, Diego de Landa, Diego Duran believed in showing strength. Cortés, Cabeza de Vaca, the young Las Casas believed that force should be displayed only as a last resort, and they used it only in this fashion. The third and last type of behaviour consists in remaining neutral to the other's values. One single example is available: that of the old Las Casas. Without renouncing his own cultural identity, still less making the Indians' his, Las Casas believed at the end of his life, that the two value systems should be allowed to coexist, and that in case of difficulties with the Indians the Spanish should be ordered to withdraw from Mesoamerica.

Todorov indicates finally how the same individuals rank in the domain of knowledge of the other's identity, and the pattern is different. At the very bottom there are figures such as Columbus or Montezuma, the Aztec emperor, who were practically blinded by alterity and were unable to recognize in the other, another human being. Close to this, one finds the loving young Las Casas, who perceived the Mexicans as having the same identity as that of the Spanish; who held the Indian religion to be close to Christianity, and who remained quite ignorant of the cultural differences which separated the native population into several cultures. In the middle, there are individuals such as Cortés, Cabeza de Vaca and Diego de Landa, who all had a rough but accurate understanding of the Indians, and who sought and succeeded in great part to eradicate the ancient Mexican culture. At the top, one finds Diego Duran and Bernardino de Sahagun. Both made the effort to master the native languages perfectly, to question the native peoples systematically on their histories and their cultures, and both wrote truly scholarly ethnographies. Yet, they are also among those who dedicated their lives to the destruction of the Indian cultures. Indeed, if

Duran, for example, devoted the greatest part of his energies to informing himself and his fellow Spaniards about the natives' cultures, it was to provide himself and his countrymen with better tools with which to detect and fight any survival of times past among the Indians.

For Todorov, this demonstrates that we are wrong to believe that knowledge of the other guarantees that we will respect him. Knowledge without love provides the means to destroy. This also shows, through the case of the young Las Casas, that the concomitants of love of the other are not necessarily knowledge and respect of the other's identity, and shows through the character of Diego de Landa that disdain of the other may go together with an indisputable knowledge of him. If the ideal behaviour in the face of alterity must include both the kind of knowledge of the other displayed by Duran, the sort of neutrality achieved by the old Las Casas, and the love shown by the young Las Casas, Christians must realize that love alone will never be sufficient, and in fact that it will almost always go with a denial of the other's identity; similarly, liberals who trust that goodness always flows from the spread of knowledge should realize that this is not so. Knowledge may be accompanied by the worst behaviours. One of the achievements of *La conquête de l'Amérique* is to teach us just that; and it is no small achievement when one considers the state of our present ideologies on the subject, especially in academic circles. No doubt, Todorov's use of concepts such as "love", "understanding", will be read as a mishmash of bleeding heart liberalism, and will elicit not a few scornful shrugs of the shoulders. But this will just prove his point.

However, Todorov not only indicates how one may behave in the face of alterity. He also uses his raw material to highlight how societies have evolved in their ways of perceiving otherness, and he constructs a challenging hypothesis as to why there has been change. He distinguishes three historical stages: societies with no literacy, societies with literacy, modern societies with cultural anthropology (in French, "ethnologie"). Societies with no literacy are, in general, unable to recognize in the other, another human being. They see the other either as a supernatural being, or as a natural object. Montezuma and Columbus provide example of this type of reaction. Societies with literacy do recognize a human being in the other, but they perceive him, because of his differences, as an inferior kind of human being, and they attempt to impose their values forcefully upon him. Cortés, Diego de Landa, Duran, Sahagun are good representatives of such colonizing cultures. Modern

society, that is, a society largely influenced by the discipline of cultural anthropology, does conceive of the other as a human being, but it also recognizes him as different and yet equal. It does not seek to impose its values. It only offers them for adoption. It also readily adopts those of the other which it finds valuable. One neologism suggested for this mode of relation to alterity is: *communicationism*. Todorov explains that the changes do not occur abruptly. Members of one society belonging to one stage may out-distance their contemporaries. Others may be behind the times. The history of the conquest of America is full of such cases. Yet, he insists, it is nevertheless true that there has been an evolution in the ways exposure to otherness have been experienced in different kinds of societies.

According to Todorov, this is why. Before writing (in the strict sense) is known, that is, before the mechanism of the human construction that language constitutes has been taken to pieces, human beings are unable to realize that their symbolic apparatuses are only just that: symbolic apparatuses. They tend to perceive each signifier and each signified of their religion, of their language, as one and the same thing. Language remains located within the space delineated by the exchanges between society and the supernatural, between society and nature. It is used primarily to integrate the individual to the society and the society to the world. The absence of writing makes easier societal integration and society's relation to the universe, but it makes more difficult communication between members of wholly different cultures.

The advent of writing reverses these tendencies. To write requires that speech be taken apart. Once this has been done, speakers can no longer ignore that language is nothing but a symbolic apparatus. To reconstruct the grammar of one's language supposes an ability to keep one's language at a distance. With the invention of a true writing system, language can no longer be simply thought of as a mirror reflection of the universe. It necessarily starts to be perceived as a practical instrument, or grid, by which a society gives itself means to apprehend and use the world. For Todorov, the growth of this sense of relativity has several important consequences. First, concepts take on more relative meanings, and, among other things, the notion of what is human becomes more flexible, making it easier to recognize very different human beings for what they are: just other human beings. Second, with the realization that language, and the structures language pre-establishes, are nothing but tools, the order of the day becomes to revise the old conceptions so that they conform to

the new facts, and to use speech not to preserve a tradition but to achieve goals, manipulate, lie, and make believe. To Todorov, Cortés and Machiavelli are for example perfect embodiments of this kind of world view, and to remain within the topic of alterity, he attributes in great part, Cortés' victory over the Mexicans, and four centuries of European successes over the rest of the world, to the development of these new abilities to better recognize and understand what the other is, and to better realize how he may be manipulated. The third consequence of the invention of writing is the correlate of the first two. As the importance of traditions and norms diminishes, the social fabric loosens. Taboos fall. Individuals grant themselves more and more what they like without any consideration of ethics. Thus it is, that massacring society is born. One example: some Spanish soldiers were the guests of a friendly Indian village; they found some grinding stones, and seized the opportunity to sharpen their swords; all of a sudden one took the fancy to test his weapon on an Indian, whose belly he cut open. The other Spaniards followed his example; men, women and children were all murdered for no other reason than whim. As Todorov points out, there was also killing in societies without literacy, like the Mexican's, but these were sacrifices. The sacrificed's identity was determined by strict rules. He or she had to be a foreigner, but from a close society, never a total stranger. Sacrifice was made in the name of a given world view, so that the world as it was conceived of could perpetuate itself. Moreover, killing was an entirely public affair. With societies based on writing, this changes radically. The individual identity of those massacred is irrelevant. There is neither time nor curiosity to know who is being killed. While the sacrificer claims the honour of his act, massacrers never lay a claim to what they do; the very existence of massacres is kept secret or denied. In short, the discovery of writing produces a new attitude toward symbolism, and this new attitude both gives powerful means to deal with otherness, and lessens the strength of society's integrative apparatuses.

For Todorov, the rise of cultural anthropology finally brings forth another revolution. Cultural anthropology shows that all cultural features are relative, and that primitive societies are better integrated both in terms of social cohesiveness and in terms of their environment. Doing so, it makes societies with literacy able to realize that differences do not have to be couched in a superiority/inferiority frame, and that, without renouncing individualism, modern times could be better lived if collective and societal needs were granted a larger place.

Caricatures of this new trend occur. The first is total cultural relativism, which leads to treating societies as if no differences separated them, to kindly sympathizing with all options without taking one. According to Todorov this is not what anthropology teaches us. Differences do exist. In some circumstances, certain cultural traits are better than others. The point of anthropology is that there is no point in imposing anything upon anyone. The second and third caricatures are counter-culture hippyism and state communism. For Todorov, both are grotesque solutions to the problem of how to preserve individualism while granting a greater emphasis to collective needs. Hippyism pretends to restore a sense of collectivity by doing, as in primitive societies, without money, clothes, books, machines, and by having everyone produce for his own needs. But, as it plasters these primitive traits onto a perfectly modern individualist mentality, the whole experiment fails. On paper, communism reconciles individuals' needs with those of society, but in practice it has given birth to hybrid monsters. Socialist countries are certainly modern; they are neither sacrificial societies nor massacring societies. Yet they exhibit traits of both. For Todorov they are, so to speak, *massacrificial* societies. As in societies without writing, there is a "state religion", killings occur first close to home, victims are individually selected; as in literate societies, norms and rules are irrelevant, the existence of mass killings is denied, killing is done without ritual.

To Todorov, the modern trend is, paradoxically, better embodied in social phenomena such as the *Club Med*, which allow for a dive into the values of the primitive world (absence of money, books and eventually clothes) without putting into question the pursuit of one's "civilized life".

When one considers that Todorov brings forth these challenging ideas on the topic of alterity in a form of storytelling, which all along keeps the reader riveted to his book, one cannot but marvel at this author's talent.

True, hostile critics will not fail to raise questions. Is his typology of behaviours towards the other really useful? What is the point of mentioning, today, Columbus' inability to recognize in an Indian another human being? Just the same for the *conquistadores'* worse atrocities; in what ways are they relevant to our present problems? Is it not curious that Todorov's modern revolution, what he terms communicationism, stems from no social change of a magnitude similar to that of literacy, only from the birth of a social science: cultural anthropology? Finally, how can any serious discussion of alterity be couched in a storytelling form?

The question concerning the typology may be easily answered. Even Columbus' reaction in the face of alterity and the *conquistadores'* atrocities are still pertinent. One simply needs to mention, on the one hand, *The Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's novel, to recall the average white middle-class American's inability to perceive a Black as a human being, and on the other, the My Lai massacre and similar ones committed in Vietnam. We would be foolish to forget and to make ourselves believe that what the Spanish conquest of America illustrates concerns us no more. Besides, the importance of Todorov's typology is primarily to show us that knowledge or ignorance, love or hatred of the other, and positive or negative action toward him, are in principle independent of each other. This could not have been rendered evident without a full account of the range of behaviours manifested during the conquest of America.

This still leaves the thesis on the role of anthropology unchallenged. If writing initiates in people's minds a change of attitude toward symbolism, a change which makes easier the recognition and the conquest of the other, what creates the new and modern ability to recognize the other's identity without finding it inferior? Todorov answers, cultural anthropology ("ethnologie"). But is it justified to give equal weight to the invention of writing and to that of anthropology? Todorov keeps totally quiet on this subject. Can the question be answered? I think so, and in a way that vindicates Todorov's thesis. All social life is ordered through arbitrary symbolic apparatuses: language, non-verbal communication systems, kinship and marriage systems, religion, etc. The discovery of writing makes people conscious of the existence of such arbitrary systems in only one respect: language. Cultural anthropology, as the science of all symbolic apparatuses, makes one conscious of the arbitrariness of all these systems. To an anthropologist, there is no more difference between two religious systems than there is difference between two languages; all are equally good. Hence, there is no more room for contempt on the basis of cultural differences. In consequence, and although it is barely visible, the invention of anthropology may prove to be as important as the invention of writing.

The last question bears on the storytelling form that Todorov gives to his book. Does this manner of handling a serious topic not lead to some difficulties? My first thought would be to answer yes. In order to tell a story Todorov had to have a unity of time, space, and action. As it was to be a story based on true facts, he had to select a well-documented case. Such studies are in small numbers. Todorov

chose the history of the conquest of Mesoamerica and focused entirely on it. Given his aim, it was perfectly legitimate. But in so doing, he lost what could have been learned from other historical facts. His thesis on the impact of writing is not thoroughly investigated because of his neglect of other true stories. On second thought, however, I am glad that Todorov did not adopt an academic form of discourse. As written, his book mesmerized me, and kept me listening to things I was not really ready to pay attention to. An exhaustive and systematic cross-cultural study would have led to minor improvements in the formulation of the conclusions. But it would not have generated a new frame. Meanwhile, it would very probably have rendered the book quite bland. And who, today, reads bland books?

---

Ellen P. BROWN, *Nourrir les gens, nourrir les haines*, Coll. Études et Documents Tchadiens N° 8, Société d'Ethnographie, Paris, 1983. 264 pages, figures, cartes, illustrations hors texte.

Par Jean-Claude Muller  
Université de Montréal

Voici un livre important qui servira certainement à alimenter le débat sur le statut «réel» des sociétés dites unilinéaires. Les modèles nuer, tallensi et tiv qui ont tenté pendant longtemps d'expliquer une certaine réalité africaine ont été soumis d'abord à une critique visant à vérifier la validité de leur application au contexte néoguinéen, mais ce n'est que ces dernières années que l'intérêt pour cette dissection a gagné les africanistes, ceci à quelques exceptions près. Cette étude est d'autant plus intéressante qu'elle a été écrite à Cambridge, haut lieu de théorisation des systèmes unilinéaires mais aussi, plus récemment, de quelques systèmes cognatiques africains. Ce travail très fouillé met à jour les mécanismes qui permettent à la société nar, sous-groupe de l'ethnie sara du sud tchadien, de se penser comme unilinéaire patrilinéaire tout en ne l'étant pas en réalité.

Le livre débute par une description de la géographie et de l'écologie de la région suivie de son histoire assez mouvementée consistant en une longue suite de pillages, de mises en esclavage et de migrations dans des zones de refuge lorsque la chose était possible. La structure politique de cette société est, traditionnellement, quasi-inexistante, mais les alliances et les allégeances — souvent forcées — avec les razzieurs d'esclaves instaurèrent

dans certains villages un type d'autorité autocratique qui fut utilisée par les Français après la colonisation et imposée à tout le territoire nar. On tend, maintenant, à revenir au type traditionnel. Les villages étaient, avant la colonisation, sur un pied de guerre avec leurs voisins et formaient des unités auto-suffisantes. Les chefs n'avaient aucun pouvoir, seulement de l'influence mais cette influence conférait un statut fort prisé que l'on pouvait — et peut encore aujourd'hui — obtenir par une judicieuse gestion de la distribution de nourriture. Tout homme important, entendons riche, est, selon l'expression nar, «bouffé» par ceux qui s'affilient à lui, agnats d'abord, puis les affins, voisins et personnes pauvres qui se mettent à son service. Cette faculté de redistribuer de la nourriture fait qu'actuellement les personnes les plus influentes sont les pensionnés de guerre qui reçoivent des allocations leur permettant de s'attirer des clients. Les structures politico-administratives contemporaines utilisent abondamment ces hommes influents qui font tout, cependant, pour que leur unité administrative fonctionne au consensus, sans interférence autoritaire. Société qui se veut politiquement égalitaire, ce qu'elle est dans une large mesure, elle repose néanmoins sur la différence entre riches et pauvres, les seconds vivant au dépens des premiers qui les nourrissent, non sans en recevoir quelques services. Mais tout ceci est informel et on ne peut assimiler ces services à une relation patron/client car l'influence ne dure que tant qu'il y a de la nourriture.

La nourriture possède une valeur symbolique extrêmement précise en ce qui concerne la parenté et l'affinité; on doit donner à ses parents agnats et cognats, et à ses affins mais aussi à ses voisins et aux pauvres si on en a les moyens. L'homme riche qui veut devenir influent, ne pouvant pas, il va de soi, donner également à toute sa parenté, doit opérer des choix restrictifs et concentrer ses dons dans un cercle plus étroit, ce qui amène bien évidemment des frictions avec certains de ses parents qui se croient — à tort ou à raison — rejetés. L'idéologie de la société nar est explicitement agnatique, mais elle ne fonctionne ainsi — ou le semble — que parce qu'agnation et co-résidence sont censées aller ensemble, ce qui se vérifie statistiquement bien qu'une bonne partie des agnats n'en soient pas en fait. Mais, pour faire pendant à cette idéologie, la parenté cognatique joue aussi un rôle important, tant du point de vue des possibilités d'affiliation résidentielle que des mariages, puisqu'on tend à se marier à l'intérieur de sa parenté, surtout classificatoire (comparer les pages 121-122 et 165-172 qui montrent les contradictions entre ce qui est dit et ce qui est fait). La terminologie