

# SANCHISMO

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## **The Possibility of the Unrational**

Substantivism and formalism have been tossed around by anthropologists for many decades. Are people basically rational and guided by the logic of their cultural context, or irrational and guided by belief at the expense of observation? So far the answer appears to be “yes.” These two perspectives have never died out of anthropology, and one of these two beliefs about human nature can be teased out of most treatises (Wilk 1996). Hobbes vs. Locke, Weber vs. Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss vs. Evans-Pritchard; for Bruno Latour (1993), we have never been rational; for Marshall Sahlins natives think differently (1995); for Eric Wolf it is the anthropologists who are irrational (1982).

In this paper I argue for a third possibility, the possibility of the non rational. I contend that a significant portion of human behavior cannot be understood as the result of any sort of logic whatsoever, including culture, error, stupidity, fanaticism, or addiction; but instead results from decisions outside the explanatory realm of traditional anthropological approaches. Although these actions are not explicable either through anthropological analysis of the internal working of a particular culture or as an intelligible consequence of some irrational belief, they do have a strangely predictable nature. These are the actions that invoke the familiar reaction, “I knew you were going to do that!” and the angry, unbelieving, unanswerable rejoinder, “How did you know?”

For example, in my own experience, being significantly behind in my work invariably produces in

me a very strong desire to watch television and play computer games. This choice to do so is not based on a misunderstanding of the consequences of procrastination or from an irrational hope that the work will disappear. Nor is it explained by the logical need for a break from work that drives me to take some time for entertainment, since I frequently watch shows and play games I dislike, while avoiding “work” that requires a type of effort that I do like. Even a modest amount of pleasure is spoiled by my constant worrying about the consequences of not working. For years I thought this was a personal peculiarity, but having confessed my sin to friends, I have found to my astonishment that most of them experience the same thing. Certainly there are psychological explanations for procrastination, but what does the existence of non rational behavior mean for cultural analysis? What I have given is a minor example, but there are other behaviors that are best understood as non rational, some of which are much less trivial in their consequences.

## **Cervantes’ Creations**

Non rational behavior is difficult to identify at first, since the traditional categories of rationality and irrationality can be applied *ex post facto* to anything humans do and make any action appear to have a cultural function; sometimes both categories apply at once (Jarvie 1965). By far the easiest way to exemplify non rational behavior is to create a fictional actor, since in doing so the artist can resist the earmarks of explicability that are so easy to interpolate.



Cervantes did a particularly fine job of this in the character of Sancho Panza.

Don Quixote can be understood as irrational, possibly insane, or rational, possibly allegorical, but most likely both. His insanity made sense, his actions were predictable, and his irrational decisions were rational within his own system of logic. On the other hand, Señor Panza knew that Rosinante was a nag, that the giant was a windmill, that Dulcinea was a hag, and that his master was not going to succeed in his quest. We are not convinced by Cervantes that Panza saw the allegorical value of his master's actions, or that his assistance was given to his master due to the compulsion of fealty. It appears instead that with full knowledge of imminent failure, with a rational understanding of Quixote's irrationality, Panza repeatedly helped him fail. We are not told that Panza thought success was possible with each new quest, nor do we suspect him to be a *saboteur*. We also imagine that he might have escaped his delusional master had he been determined to do so. None of these rationalizations quite fits Panza's behavior; nor does he seem to be the victim of irrational hatred or love of his master. Sancho Panza is the epitome of the non rational, which I refer to from here on as "sanchismo," a word that captures not only the essence of the non-process I want to describe by using Cervantes' character as a metaphor, but also hints at latent aggressiveness.

The question here is whether such behavior actually exists outside fiction. Do people in various cultures, including western ones, act in ways they cannot explain? Do people do things without bothering to justify them or consider the consequences? Of course. But do we also consider and understand the consequences and still do things that make no rational sense without any helpful intervention from the irrational?

### **The Inexplicable**

Since it cannot be predicted by ordinary reasoning or anthropological analysis, the only way to describe sanchismo is through examples. At the most inconsequential level are the acts of whimsical self destruction common in pop culture. Any trip through the

internet will turn up abundant pictures of famous, infamous, and unknown people dressed in idiotic and compromising outfits who are also wearing looks of defiance that make it clear they are aware of their error, even embarrassed about it, but are not going to back down. Celebrities singing songs with idiotic lyrics or espousing beliefs in public better left in private regularly show that not all publicity is always good publicity.

Sanchismo rhymes with machismo, and the two categories are linked, as Sanchismo is often aggressive, or at least passive aggressive. The hypocritical choices of people who openly flout the ideals they espouse have this passive-aggressive quality, as when they wear sweatshop clothing to charity balls, bring a mistress to church, or put a "Greenpeace" bumper sticker on a gigantic SUV. This aggressiveness is neither rational (nobody believes the argument that huge vehicles are safer, since statistically they are not), nor irrational (these vehicles show up in university parking lots, where rationalism is supposed to be king); it is clearly non rational.

Aggressive sanchismo may create unhappiness and damage. Unfortunately the most common examples of aggressive sanchismo are heinous and dreadful; there must have been someone among the light brigade who was not consumed by nationalistic zeal, someone riding into the canyon behind Custer whose hatred of Native Americans did not blind him to his own immanent death. Patriotism is often pasted over sanchismo to make sense of the senseless, or create value from valueless loss. No doubt some canon fodder is made up of patriots, irrational idiots, and rational self sacrificers, but not all.

Within this class of actions is the category of "mob behavior", once a popular target of analysis. While variously explained as de-individuation, conditioned response, or copycatting, none of these explanations seem adequate and the residual consensus seems to be either that there is some superorganic influence with an almost mystical influence on rowdy groups, or that the manner of categorizing behavior has created a false data set.

Of course I would argue that this is a category of sanchismo. Intelligent people aware of the conse-

quences of their actions and aware of the inevitable failure of their apparent goals will, nevertheless, contribute *en masse* to something evil such as lynching, rioting, and vandalism, or participate in self-immolation on a grand scale. The question that scholars have not been able to answer is why is the group behavior different to individual behavior? Why do people do things in mobs that they would never do alone? My answer is that people DO do these things individually, but they have been misidentified as acts of stupidity or bravado or irrationality, rather than simple sanchismo.

### Implications for Anthropology

Michael Jackson (1998) says that Western culture's emphasis on the explanation of events as due to human action and causal forces that can be predicted and generalized is a means of controlling the world. He proposes that some non western people do not explain their actions or the characteristics of others in general terms as a deliberate avoidance of authoritarianism. The power to name, to interpret, to generalize is a type of social power so fundamental to western thought that westerners have difficulty recognizing any other type of intellectual existence. Refusal to generalize or explain things was once dubbed prelogical (Lévy-Bruhl 1925) and continues to be considered a stage of mental development that educators identify as a prelude to adulthood (King & Strohm 1994; Piaget 1970).

Recognizing sanchismo precludes insistence that all human behavior is explicable; even predictable behavior may be inexplicable. Jackson and others have described and even filmed the blank look on the face of a non western person asked why he did something or why something happened. The concept of sanchismo democratizes this response by pointing out that despite our overt dedication to cause and effect, westerners sometimes use a logical explanation to cover Sancho's tracks. Freed of a western cultural imperative, the honest answer to why is probably more often "I don't know," than anthropologists are willing to accept.

What this means for the "Interpretation of Culture" is that there is a wild card in the deck. Some

of the patterns we see in culture are probably false ones, while others are less visible and muddled by the inclusion of behavior that is not really patterned at all, that cannot be adequately dealt with as either rational or irrational. Although sanchismo appears to be cross cultural, it is possible that it mainly appears in contexts where rational or rationalized behavior is considered normal. Sanchismo may be a reaction against the boundaries of explanation or against the boundaries of ordinary irrational behavior. But if we can explain it, then by definition, the behavior in question is not sanchismo.

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