Michalon, Clair, *Histoire de différences, Différence d'histoires*
(2002. www.editions-sepia.com, ISBN: 2-84280-069-9)
Reviewed by George Simons at www.diversophy.com. March 4, 2009

Not a brand new book, but a chance for me to catch up on an author whose thinking is respected in local circles. Clair Michalon, educated as an agronomist is a polymath who currently does intercultural consulting. This book is his philosophical reflection on how the technology of human communication sets in motion the values and mental references that determine the types of societies we live in, and, how we behave as a result. Please, when I say "technologies," don't just think computers and internet—the book ends there, but begins in pre-historic invention.

We are well aware of how environment shapes culture. Cultures are created and formed, as human groups struggle to survive and succeed in their place in the world. As a USian, for example, it is easy to see how "the frontier" both shaped and continues to shape the behavior of my countrymen, long after their forbears seized the geographical breadth of the North American continent. Self-reliance, taking control, creating and fulfilling "The American Dream" are values that were developed both in the push to "go West" both literally and figuratively, forming an essential part of the myth of "America."
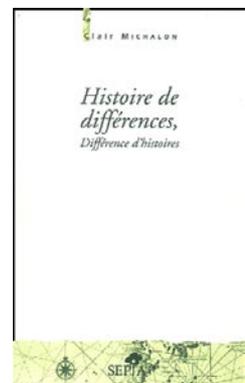
Michalon examines stages of human development from a perspective of knowledge management. He starts with nomad and hunter-gatherer and the invention of speech, and documents turning points in the creation and storage of knowledge through the ages to contemporary times. Human conflict on a socio-cultural level first arises between the primitive nomad and the sedentary cultivator of land.

Culture is differentiated by access to knowledge and how the means of access affect human thinking. At each stage in the unfolding of human communication new cultural configurations emerge along with the potential for cultural conflict..

- The development of oral memory leads to the creation of castes who are keepers of the knowledge appropriate to their function in society and who pass on what they know face-to-face in memory-friendly fashion.
- The invention of writing, a first step in the march toward individualism, encourages the possibility of abstraction in human thinking. The social bond in knowledge transferring information is once removed and fades into the background.

- Alongside pictographic and ideographic writing come alphabetic and phonetic scripts. These open the human mind to further abstraction and promote analytical thinking. It is now possible to create transcendent frameworks in which discussion of realities beyond the sensible arises and begin to play a role in human interaction.
- The Bible and the Koran bridge orality and writing. They not only coalesce the tendency toward monotheistic belief, but engender values sets that further transcend daily experience, ideologies rooted in sacred text.
- Philosophic discourse (from Buddha to Plato) inspires a first wave of democratic thinking. But it is considerably later that the invention of printing brings the diffusion of texts and literacy needed to inspire democracy on a larger scale. Habits of analytic thought can now root themselves in larger populations, historically enslaved and then freed by the agricultural and industrial revolutions of more modern times.
- Finally, radio, television and the internet increase access to knowledge to unimaginable levels. They create the ever increasing transparency and desire for transparency which are characteristic of modern societies. They provide a flood of knowledge access in which reference points and bearings, sureness, and security, privacy and propriety seem to become more desirable as they become less possible. The author ends on the question as to whether the current knowledge environment will prove inimical to both sensate perception and analytic capability.

The pages of this book are punctuated by vignettes of contemporary situations, mostly taken from the author's experience in development work. These are generally cultural conflicts in which different preferences for access to knowledge encounter each other. They illustrate the relevance of the analysis in everyday experience.

Michelon offers quite a different take on cultural difference and its development and diffusion than what is common in the intercultural field. It also provides reference points that undercut common biases about differences. In sum, the book provides a mental framework for dealing with difference, not a methodology. This frame is nicely diagrammed on the final page.

Miriam Polster, one of my mentors in psychology, often said, "If you need a reason, any one will do…" If a non-judgmental paradigm for the development of cultural difference is something you need, Michelon's will do nicely. If this seems like an ambivalent note on which to end this review, it is, at least in part, derived by applying the author's own perspectives about how we know to his work.