

Clastres, P. (1989 [1974]) Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology

Sparkling writing, and not naive ethnology at all, but a smart critique of the ethnocentrism and evolutionism of the ethnology of his day. Probably deeply flawed on the question of gender, on his understanding of how power can be imposed in and through gender relations.

### 1--Copernicus and the Savages

The idea that political power is the same thing as coercive (violent) power or hierarchical relations is wrong. It is an ethnocentrism of the west because our political power tends to be that way, and so we judge societies who lack coercion and hierarchy to be apolitical. Or, when we are being evolutionist, we call them pre-political, assuming they must advance up the evolutionary ladder to become societies that are organized by coercive and hierarchical power, the primary manifestation of which is the State. To be blunt: this idea means that in order to be advanced, developed, or civilized, societies have to have the State. This evolution is sometimes conceived, as in Hobbes, to be a break, and wrenching event whereby a society moves from the pre-political wilderness to the civilization of civil society. [This evolutionism is on full display in the discourse about countries around the world 'making the transition to democracy'--as they establish liberal-democratic States, they are finally moving from pre-democratic to democratic.] His explicit message is that these other societies are adults, not children. Part of his implicit message here is that we are sick because we can only imagine political power that is coercive, violent, hierarchical. We are going to need to learn from other societies how to conceive of a non-coercive, non-violent, non-hierarchical political power.

For Clastres, of course, political power can be non-coercive/violent/hierarchical. Political power can exist without a State. All societies are political. None are apolitical or pre-political. The question is to examine how they do political power. Or the more general question, why is there political power? Ala Socrates, he is not going to answer the question, he is merely going to show why previous answers have been wrong and on what condition a correct answer is possible. Also: what is the first motor of social change (maybe it is political power).

### 2--Exchange and Power: Philosophy of Indian Chieftainship

In a very broad range of Amerindian societies, there is a lack of social stratification, and the chief does not have transcendent authority, he is a power without power, in a sense. The chief is a mediator/peacemaker, generous giving away his possessions, and a great public speaker. His commands may or may not be followed. There is a wartime chief who is given sovereign authority, but in peacetime he reverts to the non-power. The chief is the only one who can take many wives, but also the only one who is expected to dole out goods. If he does not dole out enough goods, his group may depose or abandon him. He is the only one who can speak, but he is not really listened to. It is a whole system to stage sovereign power and simultaneously neuter it. A political realm that is created so coercive power can be separated out, seen, kept track of, but never allowed to become transcendent. Influence is conferred on skillful men, arises from their own excellence. Clastres' thesis is that these societies understand the danger of transcendent authority and have set up a political sphere/structure to prevent the emergence of transcendent authority, coercive power, hierarchical stratification. The idea is to be able to maintain power that is not a coercive power.

[In this chapter he uses "power" to mean "coercive power" which is an annoying sloppiness because in the previous essay he said we have been wrongly assuming power was identical to coercive power, that there are other kinds of powers.]

### 3--Independence and Exogamy

Big picture: the conventional view of the forest tribes in South America, established since the first accounts in the 16th and 17th C., is that they were a bunch of small bands, each of which was independent from the others, and engaged the others in relations of war, a condition of generalized fear. But in fact they were engaged in lots of linkages and alliances, in greater or lesser degrees, to each other, primarily through strategic intermarriage (exogamy), but also through trade. And very often these alliances were necessary to a group's thriving, ie the groups were interdependent. The specifics of their wider political organization were complex and worthy of careful understanding; it was not a state of war that needed a Leviathan (eg the Incan Empire) to police it.

Great communal house or maloca. Lots of agriculture and so the potential to concentrate and complexify. Chief's function within a band remains to make peace between the various families, who have diverging interests (also, still, as supreme coercive leader in a time of war). (Also, chief was hereditary, meaning this political structure had legs.) Tension between unity and conflict. At many scales, but certainly at the wider scale of different bands linked through exogamy. Do the smaller, local groups allow their distinctness to be absorbed into the wider collective and its central authority (which Clastres thinks will then result in new differentiation: social stratification), or do they re-commit to and re-assert their particularity within the wider group? Both occurred. And this tension was common, he says, to all the forest groups.

#### 4--Elements of an Amerindian Demography

Traditional demography for amerindian populations has vastly undercounted them. Their populations and densities were much higher than we have been led to believe. This higher population and density has big implications for the nature of political power in these societies, which PC will discuss at a later date. [It also has a great impact on the question of how many amerindian people died after white contact.]

#### 5--The Bow and the Basket

Hoo boy. Lots going on here. It is Clastres among the nomads, and he argues that the nomads lack the concentric space of the agriculturalists (culture in the center and nature on the outskirts. For the nomad all space is homogeneous, pure extension, natural-cultural all at once. There is, however, a division of roles, and space, by sex. Men hunt and gather in the forest (the bow), women nest in camp (the basket). Strict separation. Also, men cannot eat the game they kill, and so are bound to other hunters as providers of food. Moreover, men must share their wife with other men. It is in their songs at night that hunters escape these complex relations of exchange, these social relations, and withdraw into the freedom of a phantasy of themselves as powerful and self-sufficient hunters. In this way, language is not only for connecting, for communicating a message to another, it is also a way to flee into solitude for these men, and so language is not merely logos, it is also for constructing an independent ego, an end in itself, and man is not merely a political animal. He is also a solitary animal that yearns to be freed of the social bond, even if that would mean his death (he is, in that sense, Clastres says, a 'sick animal').

After all his critiquing western ethnology in earlier essays, here he seems to be working out his own issues much more than he is studying the indians. He seems to be coming up with shit out of thin air (the disjunctions of society give rise to a song that longs for solitude, blah, blah) to get at issues that are really just his own issues. He seems sloppy and ethnocentric (even egocentric) and definitely not taking the indians seriously.

Clear and embarrassing masculinism here. Clastres totally gets how these men could feel trapped by all the social bonds they rely on, and how they would want to flee into a little-boy fantasy of themselves as such a great hunter that they don't need anyone else. The traces of this one sees in DG are much more clear here.

Of course also, there is no mention of smooth space in A0 (1972), then comes this book in 1974, then DG introduce smooth and striated space in ATP in 1980. Clastres is a clear and heavy influence.

#### 6--What Makes Indians Laugh

The gist here is that Indians tell ribald myths in order to laugh at figures that are, in real life, serious, fearsome, and worthy of respect. This is to deal with and tame the fear and awe they feel for these figures--it has a cathartic function. The shaman, in particular, is a seer, a knower of wisdom, and among the Chaco the shaman goes, together with other shamans, on a long an obstacle-strewn voyage to the Sun to gain true wisdom. Not just echoes of Plato's cave, more like a carbon copy. The Chaco are invested in this idea that their shamans \*are in fact capable\* of reaching the Sun, of gaining access to the Truth. [Just as we are invested, way down deep in our bones, in the figure of Socrates as his search for knowledge.]

#### 7--The Duty to Speak

Power and speech are connected. In societies with a State, societies where power is separated out from society, made transcendent, and vested in a few, only those in power may speak, and speech is a command/order that must be obeyed. But, oddly, societies without a State also couple power and speech. The chief, in these societies, is the one who speaks. But this coupling is done differently: it is not that speech-as-order is the chief's right, rather speech-as-unlistened-to-empty-discourse is the chief's duty. The goal is precisely to prevent the State, to prevent the chief from becoming a repository for and legitimate bearer of a power that has been separated from society and invested in the chief. Power remains vested in society [immanent to it, DG would say]. Any attempt to give commands by the chief would result in him being abandoned. He is a figure whose purpose is to never hold transcendent power, an avatar, a figurehead to remind society of the importance of warding off separated, consolidated power. The concern is to constantly keep power (the chief) apart from the institution of power (a State)--the chief's daily speeches are a reminder of this concern. He moves in the arena of speech alone, never of violent, separated, commanding power. The social body constantly reaffirms its control over the axis of power.

#### 8--Prophets in the Jungle

The Tupi-Guarani have a well developed spirituality, and what they seek is to journey to the Land Without Evil. The current world is sick, corrupted, and so a struggle to purify and perfect our bodies and souls will allow us to see the way to the Land Without Evil. They have lost the primordial words, those that help them know the way. They hope the Gods will speak these words again.

This spirituality allowed them to actively refuse the missionaries' attempts to convert them to Christianity and move them into the missions, and to instead preserve their culture and values and spiritual view of the world.

#### 9--Of the One Without the Many

The Guarani believe they live on an imperfect earth and they search for The Land Without Evil [a new Land?]. The One is evil, which is also imperfect, transitory, decaying, impermanent, mortal. It is this and not that, and so it is half. The Good is this and that. Dual. Both. The evil is bifurcated, incomplete, clearly delineated from what it is not. The Good is a thing joined with its not-thing. The Guarani revolt against the One, but they do not seek the Many, and they do not discover the Good in the disintegration of the One. The pouvoir to delineate, to define this as being not-that, "is but an absurd apology for real power (puissance), which can declare something to be \*both\* this \*and\* that at the same time. Men and Gods [True and False, Beasts and Gods]. The Land Without Evil is the land of the not-One, the land of the both/and, the

dual, of complete beings. The Guarani are on a quest for this new land, a spiritual faith keeps them going.

#### 10--Of Torture in Primitive Societies

Primitive societies are societies without the State, without a separate, distant, despotic law of the State, law that establishes and guarantees inequality. They have law, but that law is immanent, part of society, and it says: you are a full member of the community just exactly like every other member; you are worth no more or less than any other member. Also: no member is less than the community, and none is more than the community. [Also, all members are always part of the community, none can be separated out.] Their initiation rituals, which teach this lesson brutally to each new member of society through torture that leaves scars, are designed to ensure that no one ever forgets the law [the law is not written, it must be remembered], and so that the law can never become State law, and always remains immanent. The law says: you will not have the desire for *pouvoir*, or for submission. This law has to be marked on the body, on the actual material of society itself, it cannot be written on paper, on material separate from society itself. Even though they had never known State law separate from society, law that escapes society's control, they still seemed to have known that they needed to do whatever was necessary to ward it off. They are not only societies without a State, societies that have never known the State, they are also, already, societies against the State.

Lots of Nietzsche and Kafka: the law is writing, and written on the body. Law = writing = despotism = terror for State societies.

#### 11--Society Against the State

Primitive societies are without a State (and *pouvoir* and authority and hierarchy and coercion and domination and centralized control and Law and King) because they actively ward it off. It is not because they are at a more primitive stage of development. Similarly, these societies are societies (mostly) without surplus in their economies because they actively refuse *chrematics*; they choose free time over working more to produce more surplus. The only way they would work more, Clastres says, is if they forced to by a coercive power (and this is just what is absent in primitive societies). Only that coercive power can replace the refusal of work with a taste for accumulation. Only that power could replace an economy of un-alienated needs-meeting activity with one of private property and alienated labor. That is why, he suggests, the State and its coercive power *\*precedes\** an exploitative surplus-maximizing economy (i.e. the political relation cannot be read off of the economic base of society, as in most Marxism.) Evidence: changing the 'base' from hunting to agriculture does not always lead to a State society [rather a State would likely need to be there to impose the shift to agriculture]. The real question of human history is the emergence of the State, how did it happen, why, and how might we avoid it?

Clastres is clear that the emergence of the State is not an evolution to a higher state of being, it is rather more a fall from grace, a giving in to a self-destructive temptation.

We imagine that we are the pinnacle of evolution, and so all societies will eventually evolve into a society with a State and with a surplus-maximizing economy. We are sorely mistaken. They don't lack a State (that will complete them), instead they actively produce another kind of political relation, one of distributed power and needs-meeting economic production. And for Clastres, it seems, that is the value of paying attention to them. They are an example of societies that created and preserved the conditions that prevented the emergence of State power. The specific practices that allowed them to ward off the State are therefore quite important to record and understand. The chief is not a Chief except during war (chapter 7), the locus of power is distributed ("being the true locus of power, society refuses [rather than agrees, as in Hobbes] to let go of it, refuses to delegate it" p. 209), torture is used to burn the rule into one's memory: you are no greater or lesser than any other (chapter 10), the

chief's prestige can't be vested in an institution, and it can't be banked--once he gains prestige, it decays, and he has to build it up again, when the chief tries to be a Chief, the group turns their back (ala the 'leaders' attempts to lead the groups in Tiananmen), or the prophets lead a radical break (and migration--line of flight?) away from the corruption of power, as in the case of the Tupi-Guarani. PC does say that it seems key that these societies were numerically small.

There are only 1) societies without a State and 2) societies with a State. The real tragedy of amerindian societies was the sudden presence of the State in their lives, a State they had been so successfully warding off for so long. The State can be imposed, or it can grow up from within the body of society.