

Society Against the State – Pierre Clastres

“Pierre Clastres broke up with his mentor Claude Levi-Strauss to collaborate with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on their *Anti-Oedipus*. He is the rare breed of political anthropologist—a Nietzschean—and his work presents us with a genealogy of power in a native state. For him, tribal societies are not Rousseauist in essence; to the contrary, they practice systematic violence in order to prevent the rise in their midst of this “cold monster”: the state. Only by waging war with other tribes can they maintain the dispersion and autonomy of each group. In the same way, tribal chiefs are not all-powerful; to the contrary, they are rendered weak in order to remain dependent on the community.”

-- Semiotext(e) <http://www.semiotexte.com/authors/clastres.html>

Biography:

Pierre Clastres, born in 1934, died in 1977 in a car accident.

Was director of research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris, and member of the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale du Collège de France. Took part in the events of May '68.

Anti-Evolutionary Model

Primitive Society characterized by ‘Savages’ lacking political power [Lapierre’s model] (8-10).

**Political Power*: “a relation that ultimately comes down to coercion” (11)

**Weberian power*: “state power as the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence” (11)

Critiqued as ethnocentric: “the model...is...constituted *in advance* by the idea Western civilization has shaped and developed...[P]olitical power in terms of hierarchized and authoritarian relations of command and obedience.” (16)

**The impact*: “the ethnocentrism that mediates all attention directed to difference in order to reduce them to identity and finally suppress them.” (16)

**Nietzschean question*: “when there is neither coercion nor violence, it is impossible to speak of power?” (11)

Ethnocentric assumptions about surplus/accumulation

*Subsistence economies(~~strawman~~): “living hand to mouth, from perpetual alienation in the search for food...technically under-equipped, technologically inferior” (191) as if incapable of developing a surplus. (13) An existence that “barely manages to feed its members and thus find itself at the mercy of the slightest natural accident (drought, flood, etc.)” (13)

“Man must work” double-bind:

1) assumes that primitive society “calls upon the totality of its productive force to supply its members with the minimum necessary for subsistence.” (193)

2) yet the contradictory idea of the lazy Savage (193)

Resolution: “The Indians devoted relatively little time to what is called work.” (193) (14)

Intellectual work done: The Savage does not work beyond need, refuses excess. (194) Won’t work for others who don’t work. (198)

Chieftdom

“The first explorers of Brazil and the ethnographers who came after often emphasized the fact that the most notable characteristic of the Indian chiefs consists of his almost complete lack of authority” (28)

Q: How are primitive societies political [and for C, always political (22-3)], *without the coercion of a State?*

A: The self-subverting authority of the chief who is at the service of the tribe.

(and not the inverse: a tribe at the service of the chief) (207, 209) – there’s a culture of this (44-5)

In order to maintain power, the chief must

1) convey dependence on the group

2) exhibit the “innocence” (lack of coercive power) of the office (“a kind of blackmail”) (45)

Three specific conditions of power for the *titular chief* (*titular*: ‘by title only’): (29)

1) *moderator*, arbiter/facilitator but not judge (30), pacifier (36)

- 2) *generous*, often the one with the least possessions (31), has to work the hardest (40)
- 3) *orator*, a duty but not a privilege (41)

Chiefs and war powers:

Chief as authority only in war (198 – “you are worth no more than the others” except in their limited technical ability as a warrior (208) which is quickly forgotten (210).

Chiefs become invested in war, creating a desire for war. However, their lack of authority allows the tribe to stave off becoming a tool for the chief (thus preventing the desire for war from becoming a will to power). In fact, it condemns the warrior chief to death in advance (210)

Intellectual work: “Separate political power is impossible in primitive society; there is no room, no vacuum for the state to fill.” (210)

Hanging Chads:

Prophetism

When the Tupi-Guarani were edging toward transitioning from primitive to state-based, prophetism emerged to cause mass exodus and stave off a state form. (213-6)

War

War prevented demographics from making tribes large or centralized through unification – alliances were only temporary (212-3). (contrary to Marxist/structuralist approaches)

History

“societies with non-coercive political power are societies without history, societies with coercive political power are historical societies” (24)

“The history of the peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle. The story of people without history is to tell the same truth, the history of its struggle against the state.”

Neolithic Emergence

Was there a political break? Was there a primary structure, was it through private property? (200-204)

Questions:

Using Clastres, is it possible to argue that we can transition between various contemporary forms and primitive society? (look to p. 200-204)

Is Clastres’ discussion on war useful in determining forms that ward off ‘globalization’ through autonomy? (p 212-3) Why or why not?

Deleuze and Guattari argue that to be truly anti-evolutionary, it is necessary to posit the *Urstaat*, a state form that always exists. Is this a way to answer Clastres’ unanswered question about the founding moment of the State: “*Where does political power come from?*” (205)