




Archeology of Violence

Pierre Clastres

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Pierre Clastres broke up with his mentor Claude Levi-Strauss to collaborate with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Gattari 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. In a series of groundbreaking essays, Clastres turns around the analysis of power among South American Indians and rehabilitates violence as an affirmative act meant to protect the integrity of their societies. These "savages" are shrewd political minds who resist in advance any attempt at "globalization."

Archeology of Violence Details

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Bryn Hammond says

The two last essays, the title one and the ravishingly titled 'Sorrows of the Savage Warrior', make up his start on a work about primitive war, unfortunately lost to us.

For the rest of the book I thought 'I've been here before' in *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*. For me that one had more and hung together more, though it might just be that I came to it 1st.

On primitive war. He begins by undoing old answers to the question, why war? 1, that war was a result of poverty/scarcity (no: primitive societies are affluent, leisure societies). 2, that war happens when exchange fails (war is universal, essential to these societies -- not an accident). Clastres is a political anthropologist with a political answer:

"It is not war that is the effect of segmentation, it is segmentation that is the effect of war. It is not only the effect, but the goal: war is at once the cause of and the means to a sought-after effect and end, the segmentation of primitive society... In other words, primitive war is a means to a political end."

War is against the state, too. It follows a "centrifugal logic" and cannot cease. War is a permanent condition, active or in abeyance, and its function? Freedom. As always with Clastres, political independence.

'Sorrows of the Savage Warrior' is one of his lyrical, melancholy pieces -- to explain how warriors, even with their prestige, are prevented by society from ever upsetting equality. For one thing, they must be in a individualistic rivalry with each other. For another they are wedded to death. Clastres talks about the "infinite task" and the escalation of the exploit: "The glory won is never enough in and of itself; it must be forever proven, and every feat realized immediately calls for another."

While he talked, even though he's in South and North America, I thought of the sad glory-hunt of Beowulf, and of a couple of poignant lines from that heroic tradition:

*I am led from a boast to another boast,
From a feat to another feat.*

tout says

Without this book the idea of the war-machine or 'Introduction to Civil War' wouldn't have been possible. Essentially the book repeats its message in different essays, on different topics and in different formats ranging from personal travel narrative, to polemic, to academic essay. The message is basically that "primitive societies" were not underdeveloped along the path is argued to inevitably lead to the state-form, but that they consciously choose to develop in its very being and mythology practices that ward off the formation and power of the state (as political power or power separated from the social body in general). Clastres argues that "societies of states" are inherently divided, into competing classes, subject positions, various mythologies/metaphysics, etc. In contrast, societies-against-the-state are undivided, which is what

makes them stateless, and how they remain constitute themselves as such is produced through many different practices unique to each tribe and situation. What seems essential to all is that "primitive societies" are societies for war, which has many functions, but which creates an environment too influx in terms of how power is distributed for power to become separated from the society as a whole. There is a continual breaking off, breaking away, insuring the existence of multiple worlds outside of the tribe, killing off of warriors who would assume power by obligating them seek prestige to the point of death, killing off of chiefs who would assume power over the tribe or lead them in combat, etc etc.

Tiqqun and D & G have already made incredible use of the important theses of Clastre's work. It has an immense relevance for current combatants against the state as it did for the Guarani tribes of South America. We should take this to mean a very different form of communism, one that it is an opening to many different worlds rather than simply another world without capitalism, and worlds so committed to their own particular founding myths/positions/form-of-life/metaphysic that they are in constant conflict, *thought as broadly as possible*, with each other.

blakeR says

A fascinating account of the relationship between war and primitive society, primarily in South America. It is a series of essays that all approach the topic from a slightly different angle.

Clastres' main premise here is that war is not just a part of these primitive societies, it is inseparable from their existence. He separates societies into undivided and divided societies. The former are "primitive," even though this implies that they need to progress to "civilized." Civilized societies, on the other hand, have allowed themselves to become divided into a ruling class of some type and the class that allow (even desire) themselves to be ruled. This inherently results in a ruling class dominating a ruled class, however mildly it may be.

Every society from the "primitive" kingships of Africa to the most totalitarian Nazi Reich (including our democracies) have been this "divided" society, a society with a State, where people voluntarily give up their freedom. True egalitarianism, Clastres posits, can only be found in so-called primitive societies, where even the chiefs do not have power to rule but can only advise as the society already wishes.

Some of the more memorable essays are: the first, a first-person account of Clastres visit with Jacques Lizot to the Yanomami tribes of Venezuela; the second, a review of a biography of a Brazilian girl who was kidnapped by a tribe and lived with them for 22 years before returning to "civilization;" the fourth, a fascinating treatise on the term "ethnocide," the killing of a culture; then comes a fabulous treatise on Etienne La Boetie, the man who was writing 200 years before Rousseau on the nature of power, liberty and the social contract; the penultimate (and titular) work, a comprehensive summary of the entire process of war, and how it transforms itself into *the* method of maintaining societal autonomy while preventing the rise of a State; and finally, an essay on the less common "warrior societies" along with the harrowing plight of the privileged/cursed warrior, a "being-for-death."

Lest this sound like a ridiculous romanticization of primitive life, as has become popular lately, I gladly contradict the notion. Clastres does indeed come across as defensive of these societies, but he is defending them against the academic arrogance that allows people to consider them "pre-civilized," when in reality their societies seem to be almost as sophisticated, just in another direction.

If anything, Clastres' position is one of deflection and enlightenment, trying to shift the paradigm of how we consider these people -- not heathens to be "civilized," but rather a completely alien society that have developed distinct methods over thousands of years and can be respected in their own right, without being compared to us.

Indeed, just reading the book will disarm you of any illusions of romanticism. The picture he describes of a permanent state of war is distinctly unappealing as a modern reader. Too much tension and uncertainty, and he never even comes close to suggesting that we should return to such a way of life.

His questions are more concerned with origin: Assuming all societies began this way, how did the first divided society arise? How and why did people voluntarily give up their liberty? His perspective is so interesting because he considers our divided society as the anomaly, not theirs.

It results that the essays gradually divulge more on the topic, and build on what you've already read, so you feel like their order is a logical progression, even though each was published several years apart during the 70s and early 80s. I can only suppose that's a result of excellent editing. Sometimes the ideas get a little repetitive, but overall there is enough freshness in each essay that they are able to captivate you.

Not Bad Reviews

@blakerosser1

Joel says

essays on primitive society with great clarity of thought in terms of interpretation of tribal practices and so on. bound with that cheap semiotext(e) glue. interspersed with thematically pertinent though much less interesting academic spats (as in the funny one that begins 'though it is not very entertaining, we must reflect a bit on marxist anthropology...').

i liked this part about the karai prophets:

'The prophetic discourse of the karai can be summed up in an observation and a promise: on the one hand, they constantly affirmed the fundamentally evil character of the world, on the other, they insisted that conquest of a good world was possible. 'the world is evil! The world is ugly!' they said. 'let us abandon it!' they concluded. And their absolutely pessimistic description of the world was met with the general acceptance of the Indians who listened to them. It follows that, despite its total difference from every primitive society's discourse -- a discourse of repetition, not difference, a discourse of fidelity to tradition and not of an opening to innovation -- it follows, thus, that the discourse of the karai did not seem unhealthy to the Indians, a lunatic's delirium, since it reverberated in them as the expression of a truth for which they were waiting, new prose describing the new face -- the evil face -- of the world. In short, it was not the discourse of the prophets that was unhealthy, but indeed, the world in which they spoke, the society in which they lived.'

Anna Braga says

Este livro abriga vários ensaios do Antropólogo. Gostei bastante de alguns, e outros nem tanto. Não é uma leitura fácil, os ensaios são extensos e às vezes cansativos. Gostei de ter lido, aborda temas interessantes e como existe um véu, uma má explicação, um preconceito ocidental diante das sociedades primitivas.

nico says

someone's trying to accumulate resources needlessly? eat it all
a warrior is trying to rule society? send him to certain death
a chief is trying to rule others? kill him
there's a state in sight? obliterate its foundation
men are putting themselves as superiors over women? withhold reproductive powers and end them

rules to live by tbh

José Carlos says

Awesome and fundamental!

Siggi says

I have for a long time wanted to dive into the anarchist anthropology of Pierre Clastres. Since this is a collection of articles they are not all as informative but at least two of them blew my mind (one on Ethnocide). The introduction was so full of jargon I eventually skipped it and I also skipped his criticism on Marxist anthropology, simply since it wasn't giving me anything.

Since I am reading political anthropology to get a clearer anarchist view on the development of state and other institutionalized hierarchy I know that Clastres is a pioneer and important, and quite readable also.

Malte says

The Western illusion of human nature as either grim and savage (bad) or noble and harmonious (good) still has not recovered from the shock of Pierre Clastres' work. Basically, he agrees that societies without a state are structurally dependent on regularly waging war, but he does not conclude as the other Hobbesians that this necessarily is a good reason for a sovereign. In fact, according to Clastres, the reason why these societies constantly wage war is exactly to ward off the sovereign. It should not come as a surprise that this position is extremely awkward in the debate between the various Hobbes- and Rousseau-like figures we in the West have had to listen argue for the last past 2500 years or at least since the time of the fool Thucydides. Or how about the Founding Fathers, e.g. the title of young John Adams' unpublished essay: "All men would be tyrants if they could". Well, it seems not. But according to Clastres, it is not because these societies are inherently peaceful (or angel-like), it is because they are organized against tyranny: the chief is forced to speak (so the society is given the opportunity to ignore him), the warriors are entirely dependent on the honour given to them by society (so they can easily take it from him, if he begins to desire power over them), a chief who begins to desire too much power can be forced to seek more and more dangerous ways of being

honoured (finally driving him into a suicide mission) etc. etc. One can see how this does not fit nicely into any existing position in the above mentioned debate. Also, it is not so much a hypothesis of human nature as it is about a way of organizing society. Or as Marshal Sahlins might have said, the natural propensity for humans to create many kinds of culture. Consequently, Clastres is still very much ignored.

Some literature to continue on this path:

* Marshal Sahlins, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*. The above-mentioned 2500 year old debate between bad and good human nature reduced to a three hour lecture. With some comparative notes on societies that do neither.

* David Graeber deals with him in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (and introduces the crucial idea, that the reason many egalitarian societies without a state know of domination often is because the men dominate the women).

* Tiqqun, 'Sorrows of the Civilised Warrior' in *This Is Not A Programme*. And other texts.

Heike says

Now I might not always agree with Clastre's anarchist leanings, but he is such an interesting read as academic books go and he is co-guilty of enticing me into choosing social anthropology as a discipline. Always thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating, and with a clear writing style (a rarity in the world of academe). A must for anyone who wants to think about the big questions, such as the origins and development of violence and ethnocide.

Aung Sett Kyaw Min says

how is war opposed to the State?

a primitive society is a society without a state, without a separate organ by means of which political power can be exercised by one group over the rest of the community. according to clastres, war is one of the important mechanisms by which power is prevented from ever developing into an irresistible site, by which the formation of the State is actively warded off. the war machine works to undermine the formation of the State as the despotic center from which all power flows. so Hobbes is only half correct.

as such, the emergence of the State coincides with the division of the previously undivided totality into One which ostensibly represents the interests of the undivided whole (rulers) and the rest of the community (subjects). clastres does not furnish a clear answer as to the atiology of the State, but he does hint at the initial quest for spoils by which prestige is measured being gradually transformed into a pillage of resources as one of the culpable developments (the rest of the society becoming economically dependent on the war party for sustenance).

however, primitive societies, especially war-like primitive societies, are societies against the warrior as much as they are societies of warrior. from its entry into the warrior order, society marks the individual as a being-towards-death in its "infinite task" of accumulating ever more prestige in the eyes of the society by throwing themselves ever more reckless raids.

the common misconception that primitive societies are subsistence level economies; in fact, since their needs are more or less satisfied without the hunter gatherers or the crop farmers (they are both autonomous domestic units that can be both present in a community) having to devote a significant portion of their daily lives to their respective "economic" enterprises, they can actually be thought of as societies of leisure and abundance. clastres drives home the point that savages deliberately choose not to produce more than what is

needed. there is surplus, however, generated by the chieftain's many wives, but this surplus is squandered by the rest of the society, which showers the chieftain with prestige in return. therefore, Clastres urges us to not overlook the subtle but important distinction between prestige and power.

i'll have to take clastres' word for the supposed economism of the marxist anthropology scholarship of his day. in any case, clastres' contention is that war cannot be reduced to an after-effect of the mode of production and other categories of marxian political economy that, in his opinion, have no theoretical or empirical import in ethnology, in part for the simple reason that the primitive society wields [non]politics to the effect of warding off the formation of the State, i.e. the primacy of the political over the economic. moreover, little by way of analytical clarity is gained by attempting to interpret a religious phenomenon that is at the same time social phenomenon as ideology.

all in all, a very absorbing ethnological study of the role of warfare in primitive societies.

Andrew says

Title essay is extremely interesting, but some of the included essays are forgettable. Also see de Castro's very stimulating introduction. If you are considering picking up one of the two essay collections, grab *Society Against the State* first/instead.
