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Pierre Clastres
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Society Against the State

Pierre Clastres

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Primitive societies are societies without a State. This factual judgment, accurate in itself, actually hides an opinion, a value judgment that immediately throws doubt on the possibility of constituting political anthropology as a strict science. What the statement says, in fact, is that primitive societies are missing something — the State — that is essential to them, as it is to any other society: our own, for instance. Consequently, those societies are incomplete; they are not quite true societies — they are not civilized — their existence continues to suffer the painful experience of a lack — the lack of a State — which, try as they may, they will never make up. Whether clearly stated or not, that is what comes through in the explorers' chronicles and the work of researchers alike: society is inconceivable without the State; the State is the destiny of every society. One detects an ethnocentric bias in this approach; more often than not it is unconscious, and so the more firmly anchored. Its immediate, spontaneous reference, while perhaps not the best known, is in any case the most familiar. In effect, each one of us carries within himself, internalized like the believer's faith, the certitude that society exists for the State. How, then, can one conceive of the very existence of primitive societies if not as the rejects of universal his-

tory, anachronistic relics of a remote stage that everywhere else has been transcended? Here one recognizes ethnocentrism's other face, the complementary conviction that history is a one-way progression, that every society is condemned to enter into that history and pass through the stages which lead from savagery to civilization. "All civilized peoples were once savages," wrote Ravnal. But the assertion of an obvious evolution cannot justify a doctrine which, arbitrarily tying the state of civilization to the civilization of the State, designates the latter as the necessary end result assigned to all societies. One may ask what has kept the last of the primitive peoples as they are.

In reality, the same old evolutionism remains intact beneath the modern formulations. More subtle when couched in the language of anthropology instead of philosophy, it is on a level with other categories which claim to be scientific. It has already been remarked that archaic societies are almost always classed negatively, under the heading of lack: societies without a State, societies without writing, societies without history. The classing of these societies on the economic plane appears to be of the same order: societies with a subsistence economy. If one means by this that primitive societies are unacquainted with a market economy to which surplus products flow, strictly speaking one says nothing. One is content to observe an additional lack and continues to use our own world as the reference point: those societies without a State, without writing, without history are also without a market. But common sense may object — what good is a market when no surplus exists? Now, the notion of a subsistence economy conceals within it the implicit assumption that if primitive societies do not produce a surplus, this is because they are incapable of doing so, entirely absorbed as they are in producing the minimum necessity for survival, for subsistence. The time-tested and ever serviceable image of the destitution of the Savages. And, to explain that inability of primitive societies to tear themselves away from the stagnation of living hand to mouth, from perpetual alienation in

— it has ceased to exorcise the thing that will be its ruin: power and the respect for power. Society's major division, the division that is the basis for all the others, including no doubt the division of labor, is the new vertical ordering of things between a base and a summit; it is the great political cleavage between those who hold the force, be it military or religious, and those subject to that force. The political relation of power precedes and founds the economic relation of exploitation. Alienation is political before it is economic; power precedes labor; the economic derives from the political; the emergence of the State determines the advent of classes.

the search for food, it is said they are technically under-equipped, technologically inferior.

What is the reality? If one understands by technics the set of procedures men acquire not to ensure the absolute mastery of nature (that obtains only for our world and its insane Cartesian project, whose ecological consequences are just beginning to be measured), but to ensure a mastery of the natural environment suited and relative to their needs, then there is no longer any reason whatever to impute a technical inferiority to primitive societies: they demonstrate an ability to satisfy their needs which is at least equal to that of which industrial and technological society is so proud. What this means is that every human group manages, perforce, to exercise the necessary minimum of domination over the environment it inhabits. Up to the present we know of no society that has occupied a natural space impossible to master, except for reasons of force or violence: either it disappears, or it changes territories. The astonishing thing about the Eskimo, or the Australians, is precisely the diversity, imagination, and fine quality of their technical activity, the power of invention and efficiency evident in the tools used by those peoples. Furthermore, one only has to spend a little time in an ethnographic museum: the quality of workmanship displayed in manufacturing the implements of everyday life makes nearly every humble tool into a work of art. Hence there is no hierarchy in the technical domain: there is no superior or inferior technology. The only measure of how well a society is equipped in technology is its ability to meet its needs in a given environment. And from this point of view, it does not appear in the least that primitive societies prove incapable of providing themselves with the means to achieve that end. Of course, the power of technical innovation shown by primitive societies spreads over a period of time. Nothing is immediately given; there is always the patient work of observation and research, the long succession of trials and errors, successes and failures. Prehistorians inform us of the number of millenia required by the men of the Paleolithic to replace the crude

bifaces of the beginning with the admirable blades of the Solutrian. From another viewpoint, one notes that the discovery of agriculture and the domestication of plants occurred at about the same time in America and the Old World. One is forced to acknowledge that the Amerindians are in no way inferior — quite the contrary — in the art of selecting and differentiating between manifold varieties of useful plants.

Let us dwell a moment on the disastrous interest that induced the Indians to want metal implements. This bears directly on the question of the economy in primitive societies, but not in the way one might think. It is contended that these societies are doomed to a subsistence economy because of their technological inferiority. As we have just seen, that argument has no basis either in logic or in fact. Not in logic, because there is no abstract standard in terms of which technological “intensities” can be measured: the technical apparatus of one society is not directly comparable to that of another society, and there is no justification for contrasting the rifle with the bow. Nor in fact, seeing that archaeology, ethnography, botany, etc. give us clear proof of the efficiency and economy of performance of the primitive technologies. Hence if primitive societies are based on a subsistence economy, it is not for want of technological know-how. This is in fact the true question: Is the economy of these societies really a subsistence economy. If one gives a meaning to words, if by subsistence economy one is not content to understand an economy without a market and without a surplus — which would be a simple truism, the assertion of a difference — then one is actually affirming that this type of economy permits the society it sustains to merely subsist; one is affirming that this society continually calls upon the totality of its productive forces to supply its members with the minimum necessary for subsistence.

There is a stubborn prejudice in that notion, one which oddly enough goes hand in hand with the contradictory and no less common idea that the Savage is lazy. While, in our culture’s vulgar

words, it is life as nature that — excepting the production of goods socially consumed on festive occasions — establishes and determines the quantity of time devoted to reproduction. This means that once its needs are fully satisfied nothing could induce primitive society to produce more, that is, to alienate its time by working for no good reason when that time is available for idleness, play, warfare, or festivities. What are the conditions under which this relationship between primitive man and the activity of production can change? Under what conditions can that activity be assigned a goal other than the satisfaction of energy needs? This amounts to raising the question of the origin of work as alienated labor.

In primitive society — an essentially egalitarian society — men control their activity, control the circulation of the products of that activity: they act only on their own behalf, even though the law of exchange mediates the direct relation of man to his product. Everything is thrown into confusion, therefore, when the activity of production is diverted from its initial goal, when, instead of producing only for himself, primitive man also produces for others, without exchange and without reciprocity. That is the point at which it becomes possible to speak of labor: when the egalitarian rule of exchange ceases to constitute the “civil code” of the society, when the activity of production is aimed at satisfying the needs of others, when the order of exchange gives way to the terror of debt. It is there, in fact, that the difference between the Amazonian Savage and the Indian of the Inca empire is to be placed. All things considered, the first produces in order to live, whereas the second works in addition so that others can live, those who do not work, the masters who tell him: you must pay what you owe us, you must perpetually repay your debt to us.

When, in primitive society, the economic dynamic lends itself to definition as a distinct and autonomous domain, when the activity of production becomes alienated, accountable labor, levied by men who will enjoy the fruits of that labor, what has come to pass is that society has been divided into rulers and ruled, masters and subjects

And when the Indians discovered the productive superiority of the white men's axes, they wanted them not in order to produce more in the same amount of time, but to produce as much in a period of time ten times shorter. Exactly the opposite occurred for, with the metal axes, the violence, the force, the power which the civilized newcomers brought to bear on the Savages created havoc in the primitive Indian world.

Primitive societies are, as Lizot writes with regard to the Yanomami, societies characterized by the rejection of work: "The Yanomami's contempt for work and their disinterest in technological progress per se are beyond question." The first leisure societies, the first affluent societies, according to M. Sahlin's apt and playful expression.

If the project of establishing an economic anthropology of primitive societies as an independent discipline is to have any meaning, the latter cannot derive merely from a scrutiny of the economic life of those societies: one would remain within the confines of an ethnology of description, the description of a non-autonomous dimension of primitive social life. Rather, it is when that dimension of the "total social fact" is constituted as an autonomous sphere that the notion of an economic anthropology appears justified: when the refusal of work disappears, when the taste for accumulation replaces the sense of leisure; in a word, when the external force mentioned above makes its appearance in the social body. That force without which the Savages would never surrender their leisure, that force which destroys society insofar as it is primitive society, is the power to compel; it is the power of coercion; it is political power. But economic anthropology is invalidated in any case; in a sense, it loses its object at the very moment it thinks it has grasped it: the economy becomes a political economy.

For man in primitive societies, the activity of production is measured precisely, delimited by the needs to be satisfied, it being understood what is essentially involved is energy needs: production is restricted to replenishing the stock of energy expended. In other

language, there is the saying "to work like a nigger," there is a similar expression in South America, where one says "lazy like an Indian." Now, one cannot have it both ways: either man in primitive societies (American and others) lives in a subsistence economy and spends most of his time in the search for food; or else he does not live in a subsistence economy and can allow himself prolonged hours of leisure, smoking in his hammock. That is what made an unambiguously unfavorable impression on the first European observers of the Indians of Brazil. Great was their disapproval in seeing that those strapping men glowing with health preferred to deck themselves out like women with paint and feathers instead of perspiring away in their gardens. Obviously, these people were deliberately ignorant of the fact that one must earn his daily bread by the sweat of his brow. It wouldn't do, and it didn't last: the Indians were soon put to work, and they died of it. As a matter of fact, two axioms seem to have guided the advance of Western civilization from the outset: the first maintains that true societies unfold in the protective shadow of the State; the second states a categorical imperative: man must work.

The Indians devoted relatively little time to what is called work. And even so, they did not die of hunger. The chronicles of the period are unanimous in describing the fine appearance of the adults, the good health of the many children, the abundance and variety of things to eat. Consequently, the subsistence economy in effect among the Indian tribes did not by any means imply an anxious, full-time search for food. It follows that a subsistence economy is compatible with a substantial limitation of the time given to productive activities. Take the case of the South American tribes who practiced agriculture, the Tupi-Guarani, for example, whose idleness was such a source of irritation to the French and the Portuguese. The economic life of those Indians was primarily based on agriculture, secondarily on hunting, fishing, and gathering. The same garden plot was used for from four to six consecutive years, after which it was abandoned, owing either to the depletion of the

soil, or, more likely, to an invasion of the cultivated space by a parasitic vegetation that was difficult to eliminate. The biggest part of the work, performed by the men, consisted of clearing the necessary area by the slash and burn technique, using stone axes. This job, accomplished at the end of the rainy season, would keep the men busy for a month or two. Nearly all the rest of the agricultural process — planting, weeding, harvesting — was the responsibility of the women, in keeping with the sexual division of labor. This happy conclusion follows: the men (i.e., one-half the population) worked about two months every four years! As for the rest of the time, they reserved it for occupations experienced not as pain but as pleasure: hunting and fishing; entertainments and drinking sessions; and finally for satisfying their passionate liking for warfare.

Now, these qualitative and impressionistic pieces of information find a striking confirmation in recent research — some of it still in progress — of a rigorously conclusive nature, since it involves measuring the time spent working in societies with a subsistence economy. The figures obtained, whether they concern nomad hunters of the Kalahari Desert, or Amerindian sedentary agriculturists, reveal a mean apportionment of less than four hours daily for ordinary work time. Lizot, who has been living for several years among the Yanomami Indians of the Venezuelan Amazon region, has chronometrically established that the average length of time spent working each day by adults, including all activities, barely exceeds three hours. Although I did not carry out similar measurements among the Guayaki, who are nomad hunters of the Paraguayan forest, I can affirm that those Indians, women and men, spent at least half the day in almost total idleness since hunting and collecting took place (but not every day) between six and eleven o'clock in the morning, or thereabouts. It is probable that similar studies conducted among the remaining primitive peoples would produce analogous results, taking ecological differences into account.

Thus we find ourselves at a far remove from the wretchedness that surrounds the idea of subsistence economy. Not only is man in primitive societies not bound to the animal existence that would derive from a continual search for the means of survival, but this result is even bought at the price of a remarkably short period of activity. This means that primitive societies have at their disposal, if they so desire, all the time necessary to increase the production of material goods. Common sense asks then: why would the men living in those societies want to work and produce more, given that three or four hours of peaceful activity suffice to meet the needs of the group? What good would it do them? What purpose would be served by the surplus thus accumulated? What would it be used for? Men work more than their needs require only when forced to. And it is just that kind of force which is absent from the primitive world; the absence of that external force even defines the nature of primitive society. The term, subsistence economy, is acceptable for describing the economic organization of those societies, provided it is taken to mean not the necessity that derives from a lack, an incapacity inherent in that type of society and its technology; but the contrary: the refusal of a useless excess, the determination to make productive activity agree with the satisfaction of needs. And nothing more. Moreover, a closer look at things will show there is actually the production of a surplus in primitive societies: the quantity of cultivated plants produced (manioc, maize, tobacco, and so on) always exceeds what is necessary for the group's consumption, it being understood that this production over and above is included in the usual time spent working. That surplus, obtained without surplus labor, is consumed, consummated, for political purposes properly so called, on festive occasions, when invitations are extended, during visits by outsiders, and so forth.

The advantage of a metal ax over a stone ax is too obvious to require much discussion: one can do perhaps ten times as much work with the first in the same amount of time as with the second; or else, complete the same amount of work in one-tenth the time.