

# Society Against the State

Book review

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a review of

*Society Against the State*, by Pierre Clastres. Mole Editions, Urizen Press, N.Y., 1977, 186 pp. \$12.95

A shockingly high price for such a slim volume, but this book from a publishing house “owned by its employees and sharing profits with its authors and translators” is the best general work on anthropology I’ve read. Clastres not only evaluates “primitive communism” from the inside, the viewpoint of the tribe itself, but also manages, almost despite himself, to avoid romanticizing everything for the poor civilized reader, so hungry for rumors of freedom.

“...A society... without the coercive institution of the state and privileged hierarchies... existed...” the jacket blurb tells us, most inaccurately, for Clastres nowhere describes societies which are not hierarchical. “...We need to take refuge in imaginary utopias.” But those who take refuge in “primitive” utopias, and this perhaps includes Professor Clastres himself, should be banished from the tropical forest-garden forever by the information in this book.

Although Clastres’ purpose is really a libertarian polemic against both the Hobbesian and Marxian visions of primitive life, and though he makes tribal society sound appealing in many ways, he is a good enough reporter to include much horror along with the beauty of the cultures he describes. There was no state—even in embryo—in these tribes? we must agree. But there was plenty of domination in other forms, horrible enough by themselves. This book should stand as a corrective to all brands of clichés about “man’s natural state”—including the romantic anarchist ones dear to my heart.

## Economics in the Rain Forest

To begin with, the more attractive aspects of the South American tropical forest hunting-gathering-gardening societies which Clastres has studied (both from contemporary and early conquest sources), let us take the institution of work. In the first place, we find that life in these tribes, far from being “nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes’ phrase), could best be described as affluent and leisurely.

From a wide variety of observers, Clastres concludes that most of these tribes spent at most three to four hours a day in anything that might be called work. The rest of the day was devoted to “complete idleness”—singing, dancing, or just lying in a hammock getting stoned. “Great was their disapproval (the first European conquerors, that is) on seeing that those strapping glowing with health preferred to deck themselves out like women with paint and feathers instead of perspiring away in their gardens...The Indians were soon put to work, and they died of it.”

According to most Marxist reconstructions, a class of exploiting non-producers arose more or less simultaneously with the appearance of an economic surplus. Before this, there was an equality enforced by absolute scarcity. (See Ernest Mandel’s Marxist Economics.) But the majority of these forest societies were in fact getting most of

their food from gardening. And they usually had ample surpluses, often as much as a year's supply of food for the entire tribe. Still there was no private property and no state.

Clastres further challenges the supposed determining power of "the mode of production" by showing that there are many examples of both primarily hunting-gathering and primarily agricultural societies in this region with essentially the same stateless social structure. He even claims that there are numerous examples of tribes who made the transition from hunting to agriculture, or from agriculture back to hunting when they got European horses—and were observed in the midst of this transition by Europeans—who still maintained their social structure.

In a frontal attack on Marxism, he concludes, 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...and those subject to that force. The political relation of power precedes and founds the economic relation of exploitation...the emergence of the State determines the advent of classes.

## The Institution of Chief

"People without god, law and king" was the horrified description many European observers made of these peoples. Indeed, some of the tribes mentioned have neither an institution of chieftainship nor even a word to describe it. Most tribes do have hereditary chiefs, but they have no authority in the sense of being able to command anyone to do anything.

The primary authority of the chief in his civilian capacity was ceremonial speech. Although the tribe demands he gratify them daily with some edifying presentation on the ancestral traditions, they "often ignore the discourse of their leader, who thus speaks in an atmosphere of general indifference." His speaking function was connected with his role as the peacemaker for all internecine quarrels, and perhaps the lack of respect the people accord his sermonizing leaves them free to quarrel childishly, as they will. But nonetheless they demand he moralize.

The chief was also expected to be a diligent worker and economic manager for the tribe, because "when famine threatens, the...Orinoco install themselves in the chief's house, deciding to live at his expense until better days return." As one commentator writes of the Urubu: "...you can always tell the chief because he has the fewest possessions and wears the shabbiest ornaments. He has had to give away everything else." And what does the chief get for all his virtuous sacrifices? Why on earth would anyone want to be chief? The only privilege he gets, according to Clastres, is women. He can have as many wives as will accept him, and he is chief among the tribe's polygamists, though a few outstanding warriors may also have more than one wife.

Clearly, we are here under the sign of patriarchy, but even so the power of women was such that this prerequisite of chieftainship was not an unmixed blessing. Rather than the sultan amidst his harem, the chief often appeared, in Clastres' words, as "the group's prisoner," the dutiful servant of a council of powerful women.

All this reminds me of nothing so much as the informal leadership I have experienced in anarchic political groups that basically do not like the idea of leaders. Clastres depicts a similar kind of ambiguity and tension in these anti-authoritarian tribes. Wondering about this "rupture of exchange" between the chief and tribe, the fact that what he gives and what he gets from the tribe seem to bear no relation to each other—that he is at the same time venerated and ignored, privileged and enslaved—he asks:

"What can be the meaning, then, of this two-fold process...? Perhaps it expresses...the hope or nostalgia for a mythical time in which everyone would accede to the fullness of bliss unlimited by the exigency of exchange. Indian cultures are...anxious to reject a power that fascinates them... And it is clearly for the purpose of expressing both the culture's concern for itself and the dream it has of transcending itself, that power, paradoxical by its nature, is venerated in its impotence..."

This highly "paradoxical" nature of power is constantly in danger of tumbling into mere mystification—that anarchist brand of bad-faith which refuses to call a leader a leader and instead labels him or her an "influential militant." And though I hate "leadership" put on me or anyone I might want for a comrade, still I have to say that

someone usually must lead (hopefully not always the same person) in all but the most miraculously spontaneous of situations.

The best we can hope for, I think, is a struggle against “leadership,” but as a day-to-day function we will usually need some “leading.” Except for a few of the truly chiefless societies, such as the headhunting Jivahro, about whom I wish I knew more, it is important to note that the Indians still have a recognized “leadership,” though they try to protect themselves against it.

## **The Chief in Wartime**

“War is the health of the State,” as we should know, and it is not surprising to see the State having its origins in warfare. Warfare in the most primitive of societies, rather than a mobilization for total destruction with which we are familiar, often has more the character of a ritual feud in which, on an appointed day, the score between two tribes would be “evened-up” in a sportsmanlike battle, a feast being called immediately after the first one or two combatants are killed.

Treatment of prisoners-of-war by the important Tupi-Guarani tribes of coastal Brazil was highly honorific. The chief would not hesitate to offer his captive marriage with his only daughter, on the principle that the higher the prestige of his prisoner, the greater his valor in having subdued him. After a year or so of the most splendid treatment, however, the prisoner is murdered and eaten by the tribe.

As a rule the chief had no power to force a war upon his comrades if they did not wish one. In the heat of battle, however, his authority was often nearly absolute—only afterwards could criticisms be made. And since the war chief was often a different person than the hereditary civilian chief, he could be replaced. But what would happen if a highly successful warrior-chief were able to enlist his tribe on a project of continual war, living off their conquests—would this not be the birth of a considerable power, the origin of a state?

Clastres says something like this almost happened within the huge Tupi-Guarani federation, an alliance of formally autonomous tribes headed by chiefs the Europeans called “kinglets.” But it was not, again according to Clastres, though he gives no real evidence, the European conquest which put an end to this embryonic state, but rather a strange spiritual revolt within tribal society itself.

## **Anti-State Religion**

In what is the most puzzling section of his book, Clastres describes the spiritual beliefs animating the huge religious migrations which have been a recurring theme in Brazilian history, and which, he says, put an end to the Tupi-Guarani empire. Towards the end of the fifteenth century many thousands of these people set out to reach the “Land without Evil” which existed somewhere beyond the sea. They died by the thousands as they marched, singing, dancing, fasting, only to reach the impassable sea where they might slaughter the prophets who had led them on this mad journey.

## **Domination and the State**

Why were these crazed people so anxious to leave their earthly tribes? Only to escape the fate of a “State,” or is there a deeper longing expressed here? It is traditional to credit the rise of State/Class/Patriarchal society to one candidate for original sin, according to whether one is an anarchist/socialist and/or feminist, respectively, and Clastres clearly falls into the anarchist camp. But I cannot see these elements of domination, along with many others, as anything other than a total complex of social coercion from which our species has probably never been free. At times it seems that one domination is, at best, only exchanged for another.

The perfect example is the institution of initiation tortures, which Clastres finds universal in these stateless societies. This is explicitly a rite de passage from boyhood to manhood, though some tribes have parallel ceremonies for girls, only slightly less terrible,

Spikes through the skin, circumcision, crawling for miles through the jungle, eaten alive by insects, severe beatings, branding with hot sticks, starvation—these are only a few of the inventions in the service of “group solidarity.”

“The law they come to know in pain,” says Clastres, “says to everyone: You are worth no more than anyone else; you are worth no less than anyone else.” It could be argued that this “law” is more humane than the punishments of the “king’s law,” administered only after the fact of some social disobedience. Certainly, it is more democratic, giving everyone the opportunity to torture as they have been tortured.

I would hope that this brutal suppression of the individual ego is not the only way to achieve an egalitarian community—that it is possible for this ego to expand to the point where it encompasses communal needs as its own. Having experienced pale imitations of this primitive rite in the adolescent ceremonies of “going out for football” and the like, I am convinced that there is more than simple group tyranny involved here.

This peer group sadism, which for me seems so close to the heart of all masculine relations, expresses a frustrated sexual rage, a kind of inverted protest against the violence we experience being jammed into a sex role, and a determination to punish others as we have been punished, for being “too human.”

The primary division in primitive society, Clastres says, is not between rulers and ruled, but between men and women. All the societies he describes seem to be patriarchal, but he never affirms this. Like most modern anthropologists, he apparently rejects the idea of a primitive matriarchy, taking universal patriarchy for granted. In any case, his description of the taboos attached to the most symbolically male and female objects—the hunting bow and the carrying basket—make it clear that primitive sex role typing was far more totalitarian than that of our civilization. One could be a male warrior, a female mother-worker, or, if special talents accompanied one’s nonconformity, perhaps a queer medicine-person. But that was it as far as sex-roles.

Evelyn Reed of the Socialist Workers’ Party has written a lengthy book restating the classic 19<sup>th</sup> century and Marxian case for a primordial matriarchy. In spite of the remarkably poor writing involved (something like an overblown term paper, filled with lengthy excerpts to pad out the flimsy analysis) she makes a fair case in *Women’s Evolution* that something like a matriarchy may have existed. She finds suggestive remnants of these vanished societies in the matrilineal (descent through the mother) cultures which still exist.

There is one thing, however, about which her book has absolutely convinced me, and it is this: if matriarchy did exist, it was only because these societies were even more “sexist” than our own. By sexist I mean ascribing roles on the basis of sex. Whereas the sexual division of labor in modern technological society is breaking down, in primitive societies it appears as such an unbridgeable chasm that to speak of sexual “equality” or “inequality” is strictly meaningless.

The matriarchalist argument, stripped to its bones, is that at one time the agricultural and domestic production of women were of much more significance than the hunting and warfare men carried out on the periphery of tribal life. At first women even refused to eat the meat the men brought home, as is still the case in some primitive tribes today.

Women were at the same time the guardians of the tribe’s culture or its distinctively human qualities, especially in the transition from hominid to human. Reed portrays the early “feminids” as protecting the children against the cannibalism of the males, laying down basic totem and taboo rules for the tribe, and in general domesticating the wild hominid into a fully human creature. At some point the formerly peripheral sphere of hunting, warfare and economic “foreign relations” eclipsed the sphere of the hearth.

Since this is all basically speculative history any way, I can see no reason to give any element of domination “first place,” though doubtless the State is a recent invention. If any kind of domination is logically prior, it would probably be hunting, the domination of animals by men, as the first step in the male sex’s rise to power. If indeed there was ever a time when men did not hunt.

## Nowhere Left to Go

I think all these undesirable aspects of primitive society need to be pondered by those who see technological civilization as an unmitigated disaster. It seems to me rather that we are without any desirable social models. We can take comfort in neither a Marxist optimism about the mindless extrapolation of existing technology, nor a

romantic nostalgia for noble savagery. What we want is neither fore nor aft, nor in the works and not in the myths. Must we join the Tupis and march to the sea?

But this rejection of all the models leaves us free to create our own. What do we want? Can we honestly imagine, not just rhetorically call for, a society we could really love? The stalemate of contemporary revolution is, to be trite, a crisis of imagination. I am so sick of that radicalism that defines itself only through negation. I want to know—what are human beings capable of becoming? We must wrestle with visions of ourselves.

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