

Community, Primitive Society and the State

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Introduction

Primitive culture, Marshall Sahlins has argued, is not fetishized utility. “The practical function of (primitive) institutions,” he tells us, “is never adequate to explain their cultural structure...People employ customs and categories to organize their lives within local schemes of interpretation, thus giving uses to material circumstances which, cultural comparison will show, are never the only ones possible.” Consequently, diversity is the rule in the primitive world, as much because of the multifarious systems of meaning and interpretation peoples employ to constitute their worlds, as because of the varying climates and landscapes in which they are situated.

It follows that history cannot be summarized in the manner of Marx, as merely “the production by men of their material life.” The “struggle for existence,” so called, does not determine the cultural forms of primitive society. The notion that production and culture are separate spheres (or separable analytically), with the mode of production as (ultimately) determinant, dies once one accepts the interpretations of ethnographic evidence offered by Sahlins, Pierre Clastres, Jean Baudrillard, and Stanley Diamond.

This essay is intended to open up discussion about what constitutes community by examining societies worthy of the term. In a time when the last vestiges of the primitive are being rooted out and destroyed, an elementary self-education about what is being lost is crucial. A part of ourselves, a possible mode of human being, is being irrevocably lost.

The very concept of what community is has virtually disappeared, if we are to judge by the pronouncements of Marxists and anarcho-technocrats, whose vision is of life organized around a vast nexus of production and consumption. A world of difference is not anticipated by the visionaries of perfected technology, but is the province only of those whose hatred of abstract order is tempered by a longing for community, diversity, and the human scale.

It is necessary to take seriously Stanley Diamond’s “search for the primitive,” understood as an exploration and elaboration of a “pre-civilized cross-cultural human potential,” and employed as a standard by which to criticize civilized existence. This search is not an effort to idealize a primitive “golden age” to which we can return. What it entails, rather, is the identification of subtle human attributes which have been lost amid the cacophonies of civilization, and an assessment of their possible relevance to our lives.

Primitive society presents an alternate mode of living, in which community—“spinning kaleidoscopically on its axis” (to use Diamond’s metaphor)—provides a context where people can realize themselves as individuals, and where social institutions do not escape the intentionality of the collectivity. Though primitive community is the focus of this essay, we will not limit our search to this realm. It is likely that the link between viable community and the revolutionary impulse is close. In future issues of the paper, we hope to look at other examples of human community in its resistance to authoritarian social relations.

The Myth of Primitive Scarcity

Life prior to civilization was, according to Hobbes' well-known assertion, "nasty, brutish, and short." Clastres, in *Society Against the State*, points out that this assumption of primitive scarcity runs as a thread through both the chronicles of early explorers and the work of modern researchers, and this despite the frequent condemnations of the Savages by European explorers as "lazy" and indifferent to work, lying about and smoking in their hammocks all day long. But clearly one cannot have it both ways: either subsistence was a full-time occupation or the primitives did not live under the duress of a "struggle" against nature for survival.

The myth of primitive scarcity is "the judgment decreed by our economy," writes Sahlins in *Stone Age Economics*. It is the result of a projection of the processes of political economy onto all of history, and assumes the universality of such concepts as scarcity, needs, and production, which are applicable to our society but not to the primitive past. It takes for granted the inferiority of primitive tools as compared with modern technology. "Having equipped the hunter with bourgeois impulses and paleolithic tools, we judge his situation hopeless in advance. Yet scarcity is not an intrinsic property of technical means. It is a relation between means and ends,"

It has been convincingly demonstrated that the assumption of primitive scarcity is seriously amiss. Hunter-gatherer communities were in fact "the first affluent societies." Sahlins sees the hunter-gatherers on a sort of "Zen road to affluence" whereby their wants are scarce, and their means, in relation, are plentiful. Sahlins refers to the hunter-gatherer as "uneconomic man," who, not driven by artificial scarcity, is precisely the opposite of homo economicus. Recent ethnographic evidence regarding all types of primitive societies demonstrates that, whether nomad hunters or sedentary agriculturists, primitive peoples spend an average of less than four hours a day in normal work activities. Their leisurely, and successful, acquisition of food belies the notion of subsistence at near-starvation levels. Concomitant with the successful securing of nourishment and comfort is a marked aversion to work; Clastres argues that the refusal of work is a distinguishing feature of primitive society in general. This assertion is confirmed, for example, by Lizot's experience with the Yanomami: "The Yanomami's contempt for work and their disinterest in technological progress per se is beyond question."

Technics and Primitive Communities

The presumed technological inferiority of the primitives provides the explanation for their supposed inability to break away from the constant pursuit of nourishment. Clastres, however, suggests that there is no reason to impute technological inferiority to primitive technics. Noting the fine quality, inventiveness, and efficiency of primitive tools, Clastres holds that, relative to their environment, they were quite adequate to the task of meeting the community's needs.

In reality, technics played a relatively minor role in the makeup of primitive communities, a fact which has become obscured with the decisive role technics has assumed in modern civilization. The image of the human being as a "tool-making animal," perhaps understandable as a misreading of the archaeological record due to the predominance of tools as artifacts, is an exaggeration of a characteristic only secondary to human development.

The two-fold character of primitive technics—its adequacy (or appropriateness) to its environment, and its relative insignificance in terms of the constitution of primitive society—point to its fundamental quality: primitive technics is simply a modality of human being. The cultural system of primitive society excludes the possibility of a mode of production, of an attempt at a proliferation of goods through a project of labor. It attributes a meaning to sharing, reciprocity, and the destruction of the surplus which makes acquisitive accumulation an inconceivable act. In every case, primitive societies organize the practical functions of culture by such an attribution of meaning: "for the primitives, eating, drinking and living are first of all acts that are exchanged: if they are not exchanged, they do not occur." (See Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*.)

Production, technics, the economic: these are not "limited" in some principled sense by primitive society. They simply do not exist as autonomous activities, directed toward a fantasized end called "progress". Meaning is situated in the present; time itself is fundamentally meaningful: its cycles provide order and stability to life. Only in civilization does time become history, and the future an ever-receding goal without purpose.

The importance of a system of meanings and interpretations to the constitution of primitive society is suggested by Lewis Mumford's discussion of the development of language. Mumford reasons that the complex development of language was prior and indispensable to the maturing of other human capacities and possibilities. Only within the larger, shared context provided by language could these have meaning. The original purpose of language, according to Mumford, "was not to convey specific information but to enable primitive man to infuse every part of his experience with significance and to cope with the mystery of his own existence... By his command of words he increasingly embraced every aspect of life and gave it significance as part of the larger whole he retained in his mind." For Mumford, "the pursuit of significance crowns every other human achievement" (see his *The Myth of the Machine*).

The development of language and the "pursuit of significance," one should emphasize, was a shared, collective experience. Language enabled people to create a common universe of meaning. Without the signifying activity of language, which invested objects, actions, and human emotions with meaning, human society could never have developed. Culture, to be precise, revolves around language.

Sharing, reciprocity, and the gift are the "dialogue" carried on by the members of primitive communities in order to ensure social continuity. Language and culture merge through this dialogue, which in its nature excludes the discourse of a separate power. The exchange of meanings through language is extended to include the exchange of meaningful objects. The gift, charged with meaning, is thus understandable primarily as a symbolic, not a practical phenomenon.

Reciprocity and Primitive Society

Whether as direct sharing, kinship dues; or exchange, reciprocity is at the heart of primitive society. This reciprocal relationship has a directly political aspect, as Clastres points out in his discussion of the role of primitive chiefs. Far from being a despot the chief, in Clastres' view, is a "prisoner" of the community. By his obligation to be generous and in his appointed capacity as "peacemaker," the chief ensures the maintenance of the reciprocal bond. His obligation to the law of exchange ensures that a separate power will not arise in society.

In his discussion of Hawaiian tribal society, Sahlins describes the consequences for those chiefs who would violate the norms of reciprocity. In this society, the chieftainship had begun to distance itself from the people. Tyrannical chiefs, who confiscated people's goods and made too great a demand on their labor, were often put to death after an uprising by the outraged community. "The chiefly toll on the household economy," Sahlins writes, "had a moral limit consistent with the kinship configuration. Up to a point it was the chief's due, but beyond that, high-handedness." There was a real danger that the norms of reciprocity might be overturned and the kings obtain a real power over the community, and this the people would not allow. Sahlins summarizes the situation thus attained, saying "If Hawaiian society discovered limits to its ability to augment production and polity, this threshold which it had reached but could not cross was the boundary of primitive society itself."

Michael Taussig looks at the persistence of reciprocal relationships in pre-capitalist communities existing today. In his *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, Taussig discusses the curious belief held by peasants and laborers in present-day southwestern Columbia, that the accumulation of money is unnatural, being a contract with the devil. It is considered such, writes Taussig, because it is "the most horrendous distortion of the principle of reciprocity" on which pre-capitalist society is based. Taussig sees the devil as an apt symbol of the pain and havoc brought by the plantations and mines. But it also shows that the people see the economy in personal, not commodity terms. Accustomed to the old ways in which the "economic" is merely a component of culture, they see as diabolic its emergence as an autonomous power set against them. Their beliefs are part of an attempt to preserve ancient cultural values which spell out a personalistic, reciprocal relationship among people, as opposed to the abstract, "detached," institutional relationships fostered by capitalism.

The dissolution of the reciprocal relationship between people and chief allows for a qualitatively changed situation to arise. A separate power over society, relations of command and obedience, the "mysterious emergence—irreversible, fatal to primitive societies—of the thing we know by the name of the State" (Clastres), describe the new era.

The newly-formed state power directs itself at the kinship bond. In several “proto-states” cited by Stanley Diamond (in his *In Search of the Primitive*), the transition from primitive kinship-based communities to a class-structured polity brings about a situation in which law and custom exist side-by-side. Diamond quotes a Vietnamese saying still popular: “The customs of the village are stronger than the laws of the emperor.” The state must undermine such sentiments. The rule of law is aimed at individuals, attempting to divert their “loyalty” from the reciprocal norms of the kinship group to the laws of the state. The isolation of the individual, precondition of the growth of law, was recognized by Plato, who in *The Republic* recommended that children be taken from their parents and raised by the state.

According to Diamond, the goal of the state can be reduced to a single, complex imperative: the imposition of the census-tax-conscription system. The establishment of this complex is the negation of the kinship system and its reciprocal values. As Clastres puts it: “In primitive society—essentially an 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 for himself, primitive man also produces for others, without exchange and without reciprocity.” At this point, where the “egalitarian rule of exchange ceases to constitute the ‘civil code’ of society,” it becomes possible to speak of labor.

With the inauguration of a project of labor a breach is opened which permits the autonomization of an economic/technical sphere such as exists today. The primitive refusal of work is overcome by conscripted labor; the “expressive musical movements of primitive communal work groups...where work is sacred—a sport, a dance, a celebration, a thing-in-itself” (Diamond), is abandoned. Work takes on the character of a compulsive means, becoming for the first time alienated labor.

Authoritarian and Democratic Technics

The organization of labor by the state involves the development of a new kind of organizational and technical apparatus—what Mumford calls the “megamachine”—which structures society as a vast labor machine. This authoritarian technics of the state, argues Mumford, has recurrently existed side-by-side with what he calls a democratic technics. Authoritarian technics is large-scale, system oriented, and inherently unstable, reflecting the grandiose schemes of the state. Democratic technics, by “resting mainly on human skill and animal energy, but always, even when employing machines, remaining under the active direction of the craftsman and farmer,” reflects its origins in primitive society, where the community is the master of technics, which thus cannot become the instrument of an autonomous power.

Mumford writes that “this democratic technics has underpinned and firmly supported every historical culture until our own day.” (This brings to mind the Luddites, whose small-scale technics and autonomous values were in distinct opposition to the authoritarian social relations of the factory towns.)

Mumford tells us that the authoritarian technics first appeared around the fourth millennium B.C., in a new configuration of technical invention, scientific observation and centralized political control. This new technology meant the creation of huge labor, military and bureaucratic armies, where people were specialized, standardized, replaceable, interdependent parts. However, Mumford stresses, the democratic economy of the agricultural village resisted incorporation into the new authoritarian system.

As long as agriculture employed 90 percent of the population, authoritarian technics was confined largely to the cities. Only with the forcing of the bulk of the agrarian population from the land into the burgeoning factory towns at the beginning of industrial capitalism did they come under the sway of authoritarian technics. This marks a new, more complete suppression of pre-capitalist communities and their associated value systems, and the final ascendancy of the state-economic-technical complex.

The development of capitalism disrupts, and eventually empties communities of their content. Technology rushes in to fill the gap, in an endless spiral in which each disruption of community causes the confusion and dissociation necessary for a new, more pervasive disruption. The desire for community remains alive, however, and the struggle against technology is the struggle for its renewal.

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