Potlatch

Ritual Resistance to Capitalism

Don LaCoss

2003

Before becoming Situationists and involving themselves in the business of social war and cultural revolution in 1960s Europe, Guy Debord and his friends were active in the Lettrist International. They read too much Baudelaire and Marx, drank too much cheap Beaujolais, and aimlessly prowled the streets of Cold War Paris seeking liberty, love, the supersession of art, and an escape from post-Marshall Plan consumer culture while staying one step ahead of the cops. From 1954 to 1957, the Lettrists published a free periodical called *Potlatch*, which later became the Situationist International's internal newsletter. Debord explained the choice of title for the publication in an essay in 1959: The goods that a free bulletin such as this distributes are non-salable. Only the further elaboration of these new desires and problems by others can constitute the corresponding return gift." As would be seen later in Debord's thinking on the spectacle, Potlatch was meant as a way to critically assess the vicious cultural logic of capitalism, the dead world of commodities, and the ways in which the accepted dynamics of the modern exchange economy had neutralized classical working-class Marxism. Instead, the Lettrists were hearkening to an alternative to the capitalist exchange of equivalence. This alternative was practiced by the aboriginal peoples of the Pacific Northwest famously described by late nineteenth century ethnographer Franz Boas and pre-World War II anthropologist Marcel Mauss.

"Potlatch"—an imprecise term invented by the Euro-Canadian settlers in British Columbia, probably a mangling of patshatl, the Nootka people's word for "giving away"—is used to identify the complex ceremonies meant to observe changes in prerogative, rank, or privilege. At times, these promotions in standing were closely tied to celebrations of defining life events, such as birth, naming, first menstruation, wedding, and death. According to accounts, the potlatch was generally free of strife and intertribal rivalries as participants devoted themselves to a week of merrymaking, games, puzzles, feasting, singing, dancing, and lovemaking.

The most distinguishing feature of the potlatch was an excessive dissolution of surplus wealth. Nineteenth-century merchant capitalism revolved around the accumulation of wealth through exchanges of equivalence, and those who could stash away vast amounts of capital were awarded high standing in the society. By comparison, Northwest Coast Indians regarded such hoarding as disgraceful and aberrant—respect and power came to the hosting group or clan by widely distributing and radically squandering wealth.

Rather than the conspicuous consumption of commodities, potlatch was a majestic discharge of goods: hundreds of blankets might be given away to guests, a fleet of canoes destroyed, a stockpile of harvested crops burned, or large ingots of copper hurled into the sea. The guests of honor who received extravagant gifts or who otherwise witnessed the stunning destruction of possessions during the festivities validated and legitimated the host's claims to newly elevated status. In turn, they found themselves obliged to return the gifts of the feast through even greater wasteful gestures and celebrations. The ultimate objective was to secure great prestige by sensational expenditures too excessive to ever be repaid (thus the explanation by Debord mentioned above).

Not surprisingly, there were Christian missionaries who worked hard to destroy the potlatch ceremonial practices in western Canada during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most (but not all) Anglican,

Methodist, and Catholic missionaries who were trying to obliterate indigenous culture deemed potlatching to be a vice so reprehensible and useless that it was "absolutely necessary to put this practice down" because it retarded the Indians' advancement from primitive heathendom towards civilization and knowledge. Missionaries who demanded the criminalization of potlatch often sought to link it to legislation outlawing other secret society performances and shamanic dance rites like the tamananawas. Like "potlatch," tamananawas was a catch-all term concocted by whites; it comes from a Lower Chinook word for supernatural empowerment and is meant to refer to the winter ceremonial "medicine dances" of the Tsimshian, Bella Coola, Bella Bella, and Kwakiutl that involved the exhumation of corpses, the eating of dog-flesh, and ritualized mutilation. By combining the tamananawas and the potlatch, the missionaries likened their moral disgust and terror of the occult to their disapproval of alternative models of economic behavior. In other words, to the minds of the Catholics and the Protestants who were enforcing acculturation, the radical expenditure of wealth was as Satanic and loathsome as witchcraft.

Canadian lawmakers and Indian Affairs bureaucrats viewed the potlatch problem from the perspective of assimilation. The potlatchers' stubborn refusal to discontinue their rituals was considered an act of Amerindian dissent against settler cultural and economic hegemony. As spelled out in documents filed by Canadian government agents and commissioners beginning in 1872, potlatch activities Were to blame for the "terrible decline" and "present state of degradation" among tribes on the Canadian Pacific coast. Gilbert M. Sproat of a joint federal-provincial Indian reservation commission in British Columbia declared that potlatch's pernicious influences sanctioned laziness, encouraged disobedience, and sabotaged "all philanthropic, administrative and missionary efforts for the improvement of the Indians." (Furthermore, Sproat said, the Queen objected to it.) In 1879, Sproat pronounced that "it is not possible that Indians can acquire property, or become industrious with any good result, while under the influence of this mania." Sproat's boss called for the eradication of "this foolish, wasteful and demoralizing custom" which "produces indigence, thriftlessness, and a habit of roaming about which prevents home associations and is inconsistent with all progress." Potlatch was counter-productive to the task of fitting Indians into white society.

It seems that the capitalist State's panic over unassimilable economic activity was compounding the problems arising from the Euro-Canadians' systematic extermination of Native ways of life. The rhetorics of progress used to decry the "insane exuberance of generosity" at these festivals consistently appear in the archival record of the anti-potlatch effort. Such outrage contributed mightily to the full criminalization of potlatch by the Canadian government in 1885. The values celebrated in potlatch ceremonies were contrary to the very meaning of labor, exchange and industry as sanctified in the merchant capitalist system. Capital—in short, the fixed and circulating assets required for industrial production—could not exist in a community where potlatching was practiced. The concepts of savings, debt, and bankruptcy in a capitalist society were impossible to impose among a people whose work and property were directed to channels other than capital formulation and accumulation.

This explains why post-Marxist European anti-capitalists like Johan Huizinga, Claude Lefort, and Debord were so impressed by the political economy of the potlatch. For nearly thirty years, surrealist Georges Bataille argued that the "infinitely ruined splendor" of potlatch was the only meaningful alternative to bargaining and "the artificial notion of barter" so beloved by classical economics. He called for the emancipation of the repressed human needs for festive, ritualized, orgiastic destruction which have been deeply buried for decades under the weight of industrial capitalism, a social revolution that would be based on seizing the means of expenditure rather than just the means of production. Be that as it may, the aboriginal people of the Pacific Northwest coast who resisted the attempts to eradicate the practice of potlatch after 1872 were less interested in anti-capitalist revolt than they were in surviving cultural annihilation. While some aboriginal ethno-linguistic groups like the Tlingit and Haida gave up the potlatch with very little resistance early on, others (Kwakiutl, Nuu-chah-nulth, Cowichan, Gitskan) refused to jettison its practice. In 1879, an Anglican missionary wrote to the superintendent of Indian Affairs that the Kwakiutl (properly, the Kwakwa ka'wakw) were "the most difficult lot to civilize" precisely because of their refusal to quit potlatching. British Columbia's superintendent for Indian Affairs complained in 1883 that the Kwakiutl "appear to resist, inch by inch, the inroads of civilization upon old savage custom"; for the next twenty-five years, various officials from the Department of Indian Affairs explained that the tribe was "antagonistic to the white race" and intractably "opposed to anything and everything advanced by the white man." Beginning around 1902, local Indian agents began to zealously target the "bad Indians" and to pressure the federal government in Ottawa to respond

to scofflaws with a more stern mix of paternalism and oppression leavened with wrongheaded notions of social reform, “material progress,” Christian triumphalism, and white supremacism.

By 1910, the new Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs in Ottawa, Duncan Campbell Scott (a career Indian Affairs official who has insultingly described himself as a world-class poet), escalated the war against potlatch. Scott was adamant about the total assimilation of the indigenous people of the Northwest Coast into the white Canadian mainstream (“the Europeanization of the Indians was simply a part of the story of progress” is a remark typical of Scott’s vision) and spearheaded the vigorous enforcement of existing legislation. When judges and juries began Overturning arrests made by Indian Affairs officers, Scott had the anti-potlatch statutes revised from a “criminal” to a “summary” offense, meaning that, by 1918, local Indian Affairs agents could convict and sentence potlatchers as “justices of the peace” without the bother of a juried trial. Fines were imposed and tribal leaders were imprisoned. A battery of new regulations—including sumptuary laws, strict public assembly and dancing laws, linked marriage codes and anti-prostitution laws (specifically designed to stop polyamorous potlatch exchanges), as well as an “Anti-Loafing Law” that tried to impose the Protestant work ethic on all Native males between the ages of 16 and 60—were enacted in the late 1920s with the intent to stop the festivals. Ritual art and artifacts (masks, crests, and headdresses, all of which were very important to the potlatch) were confiscated and donated to natural history museums or sold to dealers of “primitive” art, who in turn made a great deal of money selling them to collectors. But the laws were enforced sporadically and unevenly and had to he re-written a number of times in order to more precisely identify the offending ceremony. In 1936, an amendment was introduced into Canadian parliament that would have empowered Mounties and Indian agents to seize any stockpile of goods (blankets, sacks of flour, cooking oil) that could potentially be used for potlatching, but was not passed into law.

Northwest Native Americans always seemed able to stymie the police and flummox the legislators. The Kwakiutl potlatches went underground in the 1910s and 1920s to avoid raids by Royal Northwest Mounted Police and Department of Indian Affairs constables, but the ceremonies were difficult to keep secret since the objective of the festival was to gather a large audience to witness the discharge of wealth. Still, tribal solidarity allowed many potlatches to go on unmolested. If apprehended, Kwakiutl potlatchers claimed that they were celebrating Christmas or were doing charity work like good Christians, and it was difficult to find any Indians who would testify otherwise. Beginning in the late 1920s, it was also common for the activities performed during potlatch ceremonies to be spread out between different locales at different times in order to elude police surveillance. Still, despite increased repression, potlatching continued—in fact, some of those arrested and sent to jail, like Herbert Martin (Kwakiutl) of Alert Bay, BC who had been arrested in 1922, said they organized potlatches immediately upon their release in order to “cleanse” the humiliation and debasement of the penitentiary experience.

Sustained Kwakiutl defiance of the laws rendered their enforcement far too difficult and costly after 1933, and many frustrated or sympathetic reservation agents stopped arresting people. The official persecution of potlatching ended in September 1951 when it failed to appear in the new, revised Indian Act passed by the parliament in Ottawa. In retrospect, the anti-potlatch laws were less damaging to traditional customs and cultures then had been the changes in tribal demographics (a polite way of saying “genocide”), the Depression, and other forces of State conformity and discrimination. The ceremonies endured despite these difficulties (albeit in modified versions) and continue along the coast and on the islands of British Columbia today as a vital part of the movement to consciously reassert the value of indigenous dance, music, and art. A new generation of artists are creating ritual masks and objects to be used in these festivals, while, at the same time, efforts are being made to repatriate the ritual artifacts seized in Canadian police raids over half a century ago.

The story of the general economy of the potlatch is one that is worth repeating. Why settle for perpetual war when we can have perpetual potlatch? Perhaps, for those of us who are repelled by hyper-consumerism and enraged by the metastasizing commodification of existence, the potlatch can be re-tooled to recognize mutual aid rather than replicating its traditional aim of reinforcing rank and hierarchy—prestige could be one of the gifts given away! The festival of infinitely ruined splendor could be a way to act in solidarity with indigenous populations against the atrocities of globalized corporate capitalism. Only the further elaboration of these new desires and problems by others can constitute the corresponding return gift.

fifth estate

Don LaCoss
Potlatch
Ritual Resistance to Capitalism
2003

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/363-winter-20032004/potlatch
Fifth Estate #363, Winter, 2003/2004

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net