

THE FRAGMENTING IMPACT OF CLASTRES' LA SOCIÉTÉ CONTRE L'ÉTAT

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It is twenty years since *Kritika & Kontext* emerged amidst the fragmentations of the former Soviet bloc. These fragmentations were contained and re-directed into the shaping of a series of newly independent state-centered societies: Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, to name a few. Though different from the Russian-dominated Soviet State, these states still reproduced state-centered political communities. It was as if the image of such state-constituted communities was the only option, an historical and political given to which all political communities must inevitably tend. The disruptive brilliance of Pierre Clastres' original fieldwork, his *La société contre l'état/Society Against the State* (Les éditions de minuit, 1974), and that of his partner in scholarship and life, Hélène Clastres (see her excellent work on the uniqueness of indigenous "prophetic traditions" in *La terre sans mal/The Land Without Evil* (Éditions du seuil, 1975), explodes the global dominance of this image. It does so by simply "taking seriously" the existing political traditions of indigenous peoples (i.e. living with them for many years, learning their languages and living their cultures).

Taking them "seriously" simply means not engaging indigenous forms of politics as a lack of development, or as the still "embryonic" forms of human civilization. But Clastres does not simply discover (for non-indigenous people) the unique traditions of indigenous cultures. Contemporary ethnography had already done that (see the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss). Instead he uncovers a singular *political* tradition that not only rejects the concentration of ruling power at the center of a community, but meticulously organizes its social relations as ways of actively *preventing* the emergence of that central division of a community into those who rule the lives of others, and those who give up power over their lives to the rule of others. The political consequences of this counter-cultural image, its stark incommensurability with state-centered societies, are enormous. We will end with a few examples, and the translation of a key passage from *La société contre l'état*.

Clastres takes up the prevailing image of state-centered dominance and dismantles it. But he does so not by simply present-



ting the evidence of his fieldwork with indigenous peoples. In a brilliant move, he instead engages in an original critique of at least four racially charged (with often racist practices) concepts born of the colonizing encounters of European powers. To any literate reader it should be clear that Clastres is not condoning these concepts (they appear throughout his work), but exposing the immanent and concealed images of *other* political forms that state-centered societies have not only excluded in the past, but *must* exclude if the very reproduction of their central institutions is to survive.

The four main concepts of the “*indigène*” are the following: the primitive, the savage, the archaic and the merely subsisting society. Clastres shows us that conceiving the primitive as “embryonic” civilization in fact relies on a haunting fear of societies that exist to prevent the power of the ‘civilizing’ state; namely, existing *against* any state-centered form. And what is the ‘lawlessness’ of the savage if not an anxious proximity (for the colonizer, that is) to the image of a form of life in which the ancestral rituals of justice are inscribed and jealously kept within the practices, and on the bodies, of communal life. In other words, in this image of the “*indigène*”, the justice of what we call the “rule of law” is never allowed to exist separately in the form of written legal codes and institutions with a legitimate monopoly of violence. Thirdly, the archaic is said to signify societies who failed to develop writing, to secure their collective memory in the forms of separate and accumulated written codes. But this sense of archaic actually depends on the exclusion of forms of life who never needed the representations of written script, who have instead inscribed collective memory on the bodies of their members (scarring, tattooing and totemic rituals). These are the inseparable marks of communal belonging. Lastly, in the image of societies that exist by mere subsistence economies (that merely survive), there resides the *other* powerful image of societies that restrict surplus within communal needs (especially for times of famine, drought and war), and strongly resist any divisive tendency that renders accumulation an end in itself.

If non-indigenous societies still only conceive of the tribal as the negatives of ethnic conflict and civil war, it is because we still evade that *other* actualizing image of a tribal existence. Here is Clastres’ powerful depiction of that image in English translation: “The tribe manifests amongst others (and by violence if need be) its will to preserve this primitive social order by prohibiting the emergence of an individualized, central and separated political power (*La société contre l’état*, pp. 180-181).”

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari dedicated a formidable section (12.1227 – “*Traité de nomadologie: la machine de guerre/Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine*”, see p. 441) of their ground-breaking work, *Milles Plateaus/A Thousand Plateaus* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), to the impact of Clastres’ fieldwork and writings. They keenly understood and called for, starting from the work of Clastres and others, the creative political work of a savage, primitive politics.