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AMERINDIAN CHIEFTAINSHIP IN POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The writings of Pierre Clastres have contributed to the diffusion of the idea that the main feature of the political organization of the non-Andean South American aboriginal peoples was the institution of the powerless chieftainship. The range of political systems found in this area is actually much wider: it is now well established that numerous hierarchical and stratified chiefdoms flourished in the forest areas before the Conquest; on the other hand, many contemporary ethnic groups are totally devoid of chiefs, even titular ones. Moreover, while some South American tribes have deprived their chiefs of effective means of coercion, they have given huge powers to their shamans. A reflection on power in this type of society should therefore not ignore the important role played by specialists of the supernatural world.

Keywords: Pierre Clastres, Political Anthropology, Amerindian Chieftainship.

For several years, Pierre Clastres' original contribution to political anthropology has been the subject of polemical debates where ethnologists, philosophers, and political scientists clash. With very few exceptions, Americanist anthropologists have stayed away from these discussions, which are nevertheless fueled by reflections on the irreducible originality of Amerindian societies.[1] It is thus as an ethnologist specializing in Amazonia that I will express myself here, to examine how Clastres constructs the

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[1] For an analysis of the epistemological context of Americanists' self-censorship with regard to Clastres' work, see Taylor 1984.

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paradigm of "chieftainship without power" based on the ethnography of a given region. Africanist ethnologists have already criticized this paradigm's claims to universality, while implicitly admitting that it adequately accounts for its original field, namely South American tropical societies.[2] However, this can be doubted when we consider the diversity of political forms in this cultural area and the variety of modes of exercising power.

Chieftainship without power is asserted from the beginning of Clastres' work as an exemplary illustration of society against the State. In "Exchange and Power: Philosophy of the Indian Chieftainship" (1962; in Clastres 1987), the geographical area where the non-coercive chief thrives is clearly identified at the outset: "It is the lack of social stratification and the authority of power that should be stressed as the distinguishing features of the political organization of the majority of Indian societies" (Clastres 1987: 28). There are few exceptions to this characteristic of the majority of South American societies: the Andes, where it is contrasted by "the massive nature of the Inca organization" (*ibid.*) and "the island Taino, the Caquetio, the Jirajira, and the Otomac … their social organization presents a marked stratification into castes: this latter feature is found again only among the Guaycuru and Arawak (Guana) tribes of the Chaco" (*ibid.*). Here we have the image of an indigenous America mainly dedicated to "democracy and taste for equality" (*ibid.*), barely marred by a few localized and atypical aberrations, explainable by cultural contamination from the Andean world. But if we set aside the stratified political formations of the highlands and their few forest offshoots, a general observation can be made: "the most notable characteristic of the Indian chief consists of his almost complete lack of authority" (*ibid.*).

This prototypical "Indian chief" is, however, defined from an already very specific ethnographic background, as it excludes by principle all forms of hierarchical political organization that developed in the Andes before the Inca Empire, or simultaneously at its northern periphery. Inca society did not emerge as a mysterious efflorescence within an entire continent mobilized in its fight against political alienation: from the north of Colombia to the south of Bolivia, hundreds of local chieftaincies and small theocratic kingdoms have succeeded one another over the centuries. All bear witness to the ancient origins of these attributes of the "lordly" function that the Inca dynasty brought to its highest point of development: the monopoly of foreign policy, the centralization and redistribution of food resources, the conduct of military affairs, the ritualized ostentation of the chief's person and his residence, etc.[3]

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[2] Some Africanist points of view on Clastres can be found in Amselle 1979.

[3] Salomon 1980 offers a penetrating analysis of chieftainship in the northern Andes.

But even assuming that the chieftaincies of the Cordilleras are excluded by a sort of implicit mental restriction from "the great number of tribes accounted for in South America" (*ibid.*), is it legitimate to claim that the vast majority of non-Andean Amerindian societies are characterized by a chieftainship without power? Recent developments in the ethnohistory and archaeology of the lowlands of South America prompt us to reconsider whether this assessment indeed applies universally. The current ethnic landscape offered by the societies of the plains and forests is the product of a profound upheaval caused by several centuries of colonial domination, which makes it difficult to discern the blurred image of pre-Columbian political forms. There are many regressions and false archaisms: where archaeological remains and the chronicles of the Conquest attest to the existence of complex and stratified societies, only fragments of shipwrecked tribes now remain, totally oblivious to their former avatar. Their current egalitarianism is not the result of a collective and stubborn will to oppose the emergence of coercive power, but rather the effect of a profound deconstruction of the social fabric, undermined by demographic disintegration, land spoliation, military violence, and expulsion into inhospitable isolates.

If an ethnologist had a chance to travel through the jungles and savannas of South America at the beginning of the fifteenth century, he would have encountered many small towns, generally fortified by palisades, placed under the authority of a chief, divided into hierarchized specialist castes, sometimes with a hereditary aristocracy, and capable of mobilizing a labor force sufficiently large to carry out lasting spatial development works (roads, elevated causeways, irrigation and drainage canals, ridged field systems, etc.). Although a true class structure seems to have been quite rare, the effective exercise of centralized power was undeniable and often resulted in the imposition of a tribute or the regular extraction of surplus labor. These hierarchical political formations were not limited to the few exceptions mentioned by Clastres: they are found throughout the Isthmus region (Nicaragua and Panama), in northern Venezuela, in the Greater Antilles, in the north and east of Colombia, on the coast of Brazil, in the tropical plains of eastern Bolivia, and all along the Amazon.[4] Furthermore, the archaeological sites of the Orinoco and some major rivers of the upper Amazon testify to the ancient existence of very dense human settlements

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[4] Although a little dated and sometimes erroneous, the only work of synthesis which presents a continental panorama of the forms of social, political and economic organization of the Indians of South America is that of Steward and Faron 1959. For a recent case study of chieftainship in the Greater Antilles, see Dreyfus-Gamelon 1980.

and complex agricultural developments that likely did not accommodate a totally egalitarian social organization.[5] Even in forested regions, South American chieftainship is not always characterized by a "power … deprived of its own exercise" (*ibid.*: 29), and the paradigm of the "Indian society" constructed by Clastres loses much of its continental generality.

To this blunted paradigm, I do not intend to substitute another that would be its pure inversion. It is indeed beyond doubt that many South American societies know nothing of social stratification and hierarchical political systems; this is the case on the Guiana Shield and the Brazilian plateau, in the southern plains and mountain ranges, and in much of the Andean foothills. Should these undoubtedly egalitarian social formations be characterized as chieftaincies without power? In other words, are these really chieftaincies, and can power be exercised in ways other than through authoritarian command?

The idea of specifying the Amerindian chief as a character devoid of effective means of coercion is not new. Clastres takes it from a famous article by Robert Lowie, where he outlines the forms of political organization specific to North and South American indigenous peoples. Two main figures of the exercise of political power are distinguished: the strong chief, who has an effective ability to command his subjects (illustrated in South America by only two cases: the Incas and the Chibchas), and the titular chief, defined negatively by his absence of sovereignty, and positively by his role as a peacemaker, his obligation of munificence, and his oratory gifts. To these attributes of the Indian chief, Clastres adds polygamy, which would be a compensation offered to the leader for the responsibilities he assumes, as well as a means to honor his obligations of generosity through the work of his wives. However, this latter trait is far from being as common as the previous ones. Clastres does mention a few exceptions to this rule, noting that of the 180 or 190 tribes practicing polygamy, only about ten did not reserve it for their chiefs. These included the Achagua and the Chibchas, because their stratified social structure made them very different from the rest of the South American populations; but also the Jivaro and the Roucouyennes, apparently because of their taste for war. In reality, the right to polygamy for all is recognized in very many societies: among the Yagua (which Clastres presents as monogamous), the Mayorunae and the Caribs of the Greater Antilles, in many of the tribes of the Guianas, as well as among most of the Pano and Arawak sub-Andean ethnic groups. Moreover, in almost all cases where polygamy is practiced mainly by chiefs, it is also the prerogative of shamans. This restriction aside, the titular chief,

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[5] See, for instance, Roosevelt 1989.

as originally defined by Lowie, certainly corresponds to a very common ethnographic reality in the Guianas, central Brazil, the upper Xingu and part of the Chaco. The impotent, generous, smooth-talking chief does exist in South America in certain places and at certain times, but this does not mean that he is the only figure in which the political sphere finds its expression.

If Clastres can claim to account for the political mode of being of Amerindian societies through the paradigm of the powerless chieftainship alone, it is through a double movement of reduction that consists in generalizing the institution that this paradigm embodies and giving it the function of hypostasizing all political relations. Although he draws on Lowie's definition of chieftainship, Clastres distances himself from the evolutionary perspective in which this definition is embedded. In his picture of the political organization of the American aborigines, Lowie is interested in all the possible forms of exercising authority, and he thus does not consider that chieftainship is necessarily the only place where politics manifests itself. To make sense of the heterogeneity of Amerindian forms of political organization, he constructs a system of differences of degree on a scale of authority that also includes modes of expression of purely religious or economic power. This hierarchical progression from the simple to the complex thus functions as a hypothetical schema for the evolution of political forms on the continent. To this difference in degree, Clastres contrasts a radical difference in nature between the State and the chieftainship without power, the latter becoming the synthesis of the political sphere in stateless societies, since it is through the powerlessness of the chief that Indian societies exclude political power and transform it into a horizon immanent to the group. This gives considerable privilege to the institution of Indian chieftainship as a possible condition for distancing coercive power.

Influenced, no doubt, by classical Africanist monographs, Americanist ethnologists have long sought to identify a chief in the societies they studied, subsuming under this term extremely diverse social statuses. The arbitrary extension of the paradigm of chieftainship without power is partly attributable to the heterogeneity of the local situations it synthesizes. There are significant differences between, for example, the "great men" of the Jivaro (*juunt*) or Yanomami (*pata*), the "masters of the house" Makuna (*P-uhP-u*) or Yagua (*rorehamwo*) and the Suya "controller" (*mropakandé*). Some are strategists who lead war expeditions, others are faction leaders, still others are representatives of the local group in its relations with the outside world, or stewards who plan some of the community's economic activities. What's more, many Amerindian societies in the lowlands – particularly in the sub-Andean fringe – simply have no leaders. The Jivaro

case, cited by Clastres on several occasions in his discussion of chieftainship, is exemplary in this respect. The Jivaro "great man" is a particularly valiant warrior who, thanks to his charisma and tactical intelligence, is capable of forming temporary military coalitions. The members of the warrior faction of which he is the pivot trust his experience and therefore accept his authority in the preparation and execution of a raid. This authority is exercised on an *ad hoc* basis and is founded on *ad hoc* competence; it does not give rise to any social or economic prerogatives, and the prestige that attaches to the person of the military leader is not the result of the function that he performs from time to time, but rather its precondition. The term "chief" can therefore never be used to describe the status of such a person. Strictly speaking, he is not even a war chief, if by this we mean a sort of equivalent of the Roman dictator, who is entrusted with full powers by the free consent of all when the community is in danger. Among the Jivaro, as among other Amazonian ethnic groups, it is inappropriate to speak of a chief without power; it is more simply a society without a chief.

Does this mean that power is totally absent from these societies, either because it lacks institutional support or, where such support exists, because it is deliberately deprived of the means to exercise it? According to Clastres, "Indian societies" had the intuition that "power is essentially coercion" (Clastres 1983: 44), and it was this original intuition that led them to stage political power as "a negativity that is immediately subdued", because it is stripped of its coercive attributes (*ibid.*: 45). Unfortunately, I am not familiar enough with the collective unconscious of Amerindian societies to be able to judge this, nor am I philosopher enough to prefer transcendental deduction to empirical deduction. The fact remains that, even if this were true, these societies would have had a prescience of power that is astonishingly identical to the conception proposed by Western political philosophy. Save if one wishes to classify coercive power among the universals of culture, this is perhaps to show ethnocentrism and to give of power a too one-sided definition. It is significant that when Americanist ethnologists use the term power to designate an indigenous reality in a society that ignores coercive authority, it is always to describe an individual's ability to act on nature, the supernatural or human beings by magico-religious means. Most Amerindian societies have daily experience of a power that may be more imaginary but is undoubtedly less abstract than the denial of political authority by the powerless chieftainship. It is the supreme power that despots arrogate to themselves to maintain life and impose death, the power to say what has been and what will be; in short, the power that shamans are credited with.

This idea was nevertheless present in Lowie's article when he raised the problem of manifestations of authority outside the sphere of chieftainship (what he called "non-chiefly authority"), specifying the two areas in which they are most commonly seen. In the first place, he noted that the most remarkable cases of the exercise of full and complete power appear on the occasion of the coordination and planning of economic enterprises in which the collective interest must be safeguarded in the face of untimely individual initiatives. Among the Apinayé of Brazil, for example, a representative of each moiety is responsible for carrying out the planting rituals and punishing anyone who harvests before the appropriate time. The coercive power of these masters of the crops is incommensurate with the authority of the official chief; unlike him, they can punish offenders with extreme brutality and ravage their homes.

But it is above all the role of religious factors in the establishment and reinforcement of political authority that attracts Lowie's attention. He sees this as the decisive element in explaining the evolutionary sequence from powerless chiefdoms to more complex political structures. In South America, Lowie refers to the many cases where the chief was also a shaman, and shows that this combination of functions led to a notable consolidation of political power. But to him, it is above all the messianic movements that seem to best demonstrate the exorbitant power that certain individuals sometimes manage to acquire in exceptional circumstances. Tupi-Guarani prophetism is an exemplary illustration of this (Clastres 1995). Karai shamans constantly traveled from village to village promising the advent of the "land-without-evil", a place of delights where immortality could be attained without the ordeal of death. Thanks to their persuasive skills, these wandering prophets sometimes led the populations of several villages on interminable migrations towards the land of immortality. The influence they exerted over their followers was immense, and their wildest wishes were carried out without a murmur. Completely outside the ordinary obligations of society, some of these "god-men" had the pomp of monarchs; like the Inca sovereign, they could not be approached by laymen. The authority of the Tupi-Guarani prophets was all the more ostentatious in that it constituted a kind of counterweight – or perhaps even a reaction to the evolution of local chieftaincies towards a form of centralized and coercive power. As Clastres writes: "The Tupi-Guarani chiefs were not despots, to be sure; but they were not altogether powerless chiefs either" (Clastres 1987: 213). Yet Clastres scarcely draws any conclusions from this paradoxical reversal, which establishes the possibility of undivided authority in a place other than the chieftainship. Only one sentence, in the last page of *Society Against the State*, concedes in a hypothetical mode that "in the discourse of the prophets there may lie the seeds of the discourse

of power" (p. 218). But this concession is immediately canceled when he reduces prophetism to a particular manifestation of the permanent effort of savages to prevent chiefs from being chiefs, in short to a surge of society against the State. Beyond the prophetic reaction to the emergence of a structured chieftainship, it is the whole question of the basis of authority in religion that is raised here.

Since Condorcet, most evolutionary interpretations of history have emphasized the role of religion and its ministers in the formation of hierarchical societies and in legitimizing the early modes of political domination. Lowie's hypotheses point in this direction, as does Clastres' remark on prophetism. But it is the very nature of religious power that we need to be able to question beyond any conjectural genesis, i.e., independently of its capacity to legitimize civil authority or to constitute its seed. In short, can we say that the power of Amerindian shamans is in its essence political, even when it is not adorned with the attributes of command?

This seems to be the view of ethnologists who have studied shamanism in the lowlands of South America. Among the Kuikuru of Brazil, for example, political control is exercised entirely by the shaman, who manages to steer the decisions of the local group much more effectively than the titular chief. Gertrude Dole shows that by using divination to determine who is supposedly responsible for criminal acts, the shaman is invested with considerable power, since he can designate suitable culprits for public vindication, thereby exposing them to execution. By manipulating public opinion, the Kuikuru shaman is able to exert a social control that is all the more effective because it is not perceived as such by those who are subjected to it. Charles Wagley's description of the shamanism of the Tapirapé Indians of Brazil leads to similar conclusions. But this dark power of appearing as a source of judicial truth through the inspiration of invisible powers is very little compared with the status of intercessor conferred on the shaman before these same powers. Among the Desana of north-western Amazonia, the shaman's main function is to negotiate with a spirit master of animals for the supply of game for his local group. This negotiation takes the form of an exchange in which the animal master releases some of his subjects to be hunted by the Desana, in exchange for human souls given to him by the shaman, who in turn are transformed into animals, filling the void thus created in nature. The shaman thus has the enormous privilege of disposing of the fate of the dead as he sees fit, so that the living can feed (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971). Among the Yagua of the Peruvian Amazon, the shaman's role as mediator is also central, since he makes productive hunting possible, controls the reproduction of fauna

and helps to make gardens fertile, as well as protecting cultivated species (Chaumeil 1983).[6]

Ultimately, one of the most common attributes of the Amerindian shaman is undoubtedly the symbolic control exercised over certain material or ideal resources on which collective existence depends. This special status gives him the right to polygamy as often as the impotent chief; but unlike the impotent chief, who displays his oratorical talents before an indifferent audience, the shaman is always assured of an attentive audience. Is this a case of real political power? No, if we agree with Clastres that politics boils down to exercising or exorcising coercion. Yes, if we think that the ability to appear as the condition for the harmonious reproduction of society is a fundamental component of power in all premodern societies.

I do not regard this pure observation as a new or alternative definition of politics in Amerindian societies, as I have little interest in replacing an ontology of indivision with a sociology of religion. Moreover, it does not seem to me to be essential – except for innocent rhetorical purposes – to say that the form of influence on collective life that many Amerindian societies grant to practitioners of shamanism is political. This runs the risk of diluting the specificity of politics in the social conditions of symbolic reproduction or in the ordinary interplay of social relations and personal strategies. I would therefore be rather minimalistic in my definition of the political, arguing that the use of this category is useless in accounting for the structure and functioning of certain societies that do not have an effective body to manage public affairs. But if, as Clastres believes, politics is a matter of power (whether real or deprived of the means to exercise it), then we have to agree that, in many South American acephalous societies, shamans are the only ones to exercise a power over others that is specifically different from the relationships of authority defined by the ties between relatives. Admittedly, there are few societies in which shamans have been able to convert this privilege into a basis for effective domination. But that doesn't matter after all. Why bother to energetically impose one's will on others, if one is perceived as the mediator of invisible powers, as the necessary condition for restoring disturbed balances, as the guardian of all afflictions?

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[6] In concluding his analysis of the respective statuses of the chief and the shaman among the Yagua, Chaumeil 1983 makes the following remark, which is entirely relevant to our discussion: "The fact that the potential exercise of power is in the hands of the shamans and not the chiefs suggests that the very essence of political power is religious, and that it may be the only possible form of power in a society without an effective political body" (p. 250).

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