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THE PIERRE CLASTRES TURN. SOCIETIES AGAINST THE STATE AND THE INSTITUTION OF THE SOCIAL: CLASTRES, LEFORT, GAUCHET

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ABSTRACT

Between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, a group of French thinkers gravitating around journals such as *Textures* and *Libre* worked on a common theoretical project: they intended to critique Marxism, structuralism, and human sciences, seeing the social field as a symbolic institution. Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, Marcel Gauchet, Miguel Abensour, Marc Richir, and Pierre Clastres are the main figures of this group. This article investigates the role that Clastres' thought played in this project and debate. After presenting the historical and theoretical backdrop to these scholars' work – the influences of anthropology, structuralism, Marxism, and phenomenology – the text maps out the contours of their common theoretical project. The subsequent sections focus more closely on Lefort and Gauchet's thinking in order to understand their relationship to Clastres' ideas.

Keywords: Pierre Clastres, Claude Lefort, Marcel Gauchet, Institution, Symbolic.

Introduction

Society Against the State was published in 1974, as a collection of essays Pierre Clastres wrote between 1963 and 1973 and a hitherto unpublished concluding chapter (Clastres 1989). In this work, which has become a classic of anthropology, Clastres presented the so-called "savage" or "primitive" societies as societies that order themselves against coercive power and the division between rulers and ruled. Beneath the apparent stagnation of these societies, he uncovers a "sociological *intentionality*" – the continuous choice

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against the State – highlighting a political question at the origin of social organization. He could thus assert that "even in societies in which the political institution is absent, where for example chiefs do not exist, *even there* the political is present. Even there the question of power is posed" (*ibid.*: 22-23). The thesis was clear: every society is political, it orders and organizes itself from a choice about its relationship with otherness and division. Continuing but at the same time going beyond structuralism and the teachings of Lévi-Strauss, Clastres thus paved the way for political anthropology.

These theses resonated broadly in 1970s France (Moyn 2004). Over time, Clastres became a point of reference for libertarian thinking, for a critique of bourgeois democracy and its institutions. One group of thinkers and activists in particular – first and foremost, Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, Marcel Gauchet, Miguel Abensour, and Marc Richir – took up the anthropologist's ideas, integrating them into a broader rediscovery of political philosophy, casting a critical light on Marxism, structuralism, and human sciences (Abensour 1987). This composite group formed around the journals *Textures* and *Libre* in the 1970s, but its roots can be traced back to the experience of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Berthot 2007). The work these thinkers pursued since the late 1960s if not earlier had strong affinities with Clastres' proposal. Lefort, Castoriadis, and companions followed the line of thought inaugurated by structuralism, coopting the tools offered by anthropology, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis to arrive at a holistic reevaluation of the symbolic and political dimension of societies against determinisms, mechanisms, and scientism. The result was a set of ideas we could gather under the name "theory of the institution of the social".

These affinities arose from long-standing contacts between Clastres and this group of thinkers, which led to a true collaboration. Not only did Clastres take an active part in the joint research project, he helped found the journal *Libre* and joined the reading group on La Boétie's *Discours de la servitude volontaire*.[1] His intellectual history intersects with Lefort and his companions on several occasions. As we shall see, the anthropologist also participated in the journal *Textures*, after following with interest *Socialisme ou Barbarie* during the Fifties, which helped him to move from the PCF to the critique of Marxism and to the anti-totalitarian forefront. And not only. In 1955, Clastres, studying philosophy at the time, attended Lefort's course on Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Lévi-Strauss 1949) at the Sorbonne.

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[1] The result of this reading group was the famous Payot edition of La Boétie's *Discours*, edited by Abensour and Gauchet, which closes with essays by Lefort and Clastres himself (La Boétie 1985).

Thus, as Clastres was close to the debate animated by Lefort, Castoriadis, and Gauchet, it is legitimate to think that his "Copernican revolution" (Clastres 1989: 7-27) may also have been nourished by the work of this group of thinkers. However, the entry of Clastres' theses into the *Textures* and *Libre* groups, which took place in the early 1970s through the mediation of Marcel Gauchet, was a real intellectual upheaval for many participants. If, as Miguel Abensour argued (Abensour 2017: 21), it was precisely the common admiration for Clastres' theses that united the group around *Libre*, a question arises: what did Clastres bring to this group and its theoretical project? Since Lefort, Castoriadis, and Gauchet were already pondering the idea that societies are symbolically instituted during the 1950s and 1960s, why was Clastres' work so important to some of them? What did they draw from it and how much did it contribute to forming the collection of ideas that we can call the "theory of the institution of the social"?

I will attempt to answer these questions in the following pages. Rather than examining Clastres' work directly, I will concentrate on their interpretation and reception by some of the other thinkers mentioned above. It will first be necessary to present the general framework of this common research and the contours of this theory. I will then follow the traces of Clastres' thought in the work of two leading figures: Claude Lefort and Marcel Gauchet.

1. The context: *Textures*, *libre*, and the theory of the institution of the social

The first issue of *Libre* appeared in 1976. The editorial board included Miguel Abensour, Cornelius Castoriadis, Marcel Gauchet, Claude Lefort, Maurice Luciani, and Pierre Clastres: a group that could hardly have been more diverse, but was united by a common theoretical-political project, as marginal as it was rooted in France's intellectual and political history in the second half of the twentieth century.

Though their stances differed, the editorial board's members were all staunch adherents of the *pôle antitotalitaire* (Dosse 2021: 223-230), which in the France of the 1970s brought together various theorists critical of French Communist Party politics and the USSR experience (Dosse 2018, Christofferson 2004). They were not aligned with official Marxism, distant from the interpretations first of Sartre and then of Althusser. Not by chance, in the same year that saw the magazine's first issue, Lefort published his book on Solzhenitsyn (Lefort 1976).

However, the journal's theoretical reach is much broader. Its subtitle, *Politique, anthropologie, philosophie*, sets the agenda. It aims to move politics out of the realm of science and think about it through the tools offered by philosophy, sociology, and anthropology while breaking down the barriers between disciplines. The opening article, entitled *Maintenant*, although written by Lefort, presents the general theoretical framework, positioning the group in the French debate of the time (Lefort 2007: 275-300). Starting with 1968 as a watershed date, Lefort analyzes the theoretical debate in the eight years since the May events and the eight years before them, taking stock of the state of political theory in France. He argues that scientism and formalism corroded political philosophy: they misunderstood the symbolic dimension of the social (*le social*), distorting the difference between the discourse of knowledge and its object into a certain immanentism.

By contrast, Lefort and the *Libre* group propose a revival of political philosophy. They have two main targets: structuralism – and the post-structuralist version represented by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze (*ibid.*: 284-285) – and Marxism, both in the orthodox form propagated by the PCF and in Althusser's structuralist interpretation. Indeed, structuralism is guilty of promoting a scientific analysis of the social that reduces it to an object, a set of mute, universal data that can be grasped objectively. Structure, when understood, as it is by Lévi-Strauss, as a mathematizable and universalizable datum, drains the social of its meaning by leading us to believe it can be reduced to purely objective fact. Marxism, for its part, can be faulted for its materialism – the illusion that the economic and material basis, objectively identifiable through rigorous scientific analysis, hides social truth – its belief in an end of history, in a socialist society at long last united and pacified – and its idea of the Party's absolute knowledge underlying the division of the society between those who command and those must obey. Lefort's conclusion is clear: the task must be to bring the dimension of the political back to light. *Le politique*, he writes

> defines neither a set of institutions in society, nor a network of relations extracted, like an object, from multiple networks of equal use to science. If we cling to this word, despite the perversion of its use, it is because it allows us to consider the whole of the social, not a substance, but this differentiated *milieu* that is open to the generality of representation and opens up to itself in the work of representation, arranged in such a way that it is a matter of its own identity and at the same time a question of external reality, where individuals find their identifying references and gain access to the same reality (*ibid.*: 294).

The social, Lefort thus argues, is a politically instituted symbolic totality. It is continuously defining itself.

As we trace the origins of this theoretical hypothesis, we see a much broader history that goes beyond *Libre*, covering at least the previous two decades and dating back to the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group founded by Lefort and Castoriadis themselves in 1949 and animated by the latter until 1968.[2] This group, whose political marginality and small size belied its major theoretical contribution, championed a harsh critique of the Soviet regime and an interpretation of Marx's texts that did not spare criticism of economism and the idea of the end of history (Caumières *et al.* 2012: 175-225). For the members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the belief in a pacified society free of divisions and class conflicts was a dangerous illusion that led to bureaucratic and totalitarian perversion. Not only: they harshly criticized the Party form, which is inevitably linked to the division between leaders and the led (Lefort 1979: 98-113) that perverted the Russian Revolution into a bureaucratic society. Consequently, the members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* considered the USSR not the temporarily corrupt home of socialism but the primary enemy of the socialist and proletarian revolution.[3]

But to trace the core of *Libre*'s theoretical project more clearly, we must move to the end of the 1960s. Only two years before the first issue of *Libre*, another small publishing project ended. It was the journal *Textures*, published from 1972 until 1975, and involving some of the same theorists: Abensour, Castoriadis, Gauchet, and Lefort.

This journal, founded in Brussels in 1968 by students of the philosopher Max Loreau, had been revived in a new guise in 1971 when Gauchet and Richir had thought of changing course by first involving Lefort and Castoriadis and shifting the project's axis toward Paris and political philosophy. The first issue, entitled *Du politique*, announces the group's aim: a rehabilitation of political philosophy arising from a critique of economism and scientism and a parallel rediscovery of the symbolic roots of any society, of the dimension of the political. It was here that what we can call it "the theory of the institution of the social" took shape.

Indeed, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lefort, Castoriadis, Gauchet, and Richir took up Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and the concept of *Institution* in particular (Di Pierro 2024). *Institution* was Merleau-Ponty's rendering of the Husserlian term *Stiftung*, with which he sought to encapsulate the unending intertwining of permanence and change, of event and process, the continually renewed dimension of meaning and history. By adopting Merleau-Ponty's theory for their

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[2] About *Socialisme ou Barbarie* see: Frager 2021, Dosse 2014, 2018: 250-251 and 2021: 205-217, Hastings-King 2015, Caumières *et al.* 2012, Gottraux 1997.

[3] See Castoriadis 1988a, 1988b and 2018, Lefort 1979.

analysis of the social and political, the *Textures* group came to describe the social as an "institution" (*ibid.*: 79-82). With this term, they define the social as a totality, a symbolic field in which meanings and actions are woven together. It is a dimension that continually renews itself through class conflict and constant self-interpretation, i.e., by sublimating conflict into the symbolic dimension.

In the article that opens the first issue of the new series of *Textures*, Lefort and Gauchet explain that since social space is symbolic rather than a real space, no society can ever really coincide with itself. In short, the science of society is never possible, nor is achieving objective knowledge. Representation always stands in the way. Division makes it impossible for the social to coincide with itself. However, this loss of totality produces meaning and sets in motion the mechanism of continuous self-representation of the social. This takes place in the perpetual attempt to define itself, to ground itself, and in that effort's inevitable failure. It is "fundamentally questioning" (Lefort-Gauchet 1971: 18).

In this impossibility of totality – i.e., the impossibility of bringing society back to unity, of leading it back to the origin, to the foundation – Lefort and Gauchet see an elusive and irremediable division that stands at the bottom of every society and expresses itself at several levels (*ibid.*: 11-14). It is first an internal split in the society: between the parties struggling for power, between the classes. But it is also a division concerning an ever-absent, irretrievable origin between the social and its representation, that is, between the social and its representation of power. Indeed, the latter is the symbolic place where the self-representation of the social shows itself and becomes effective. This division, Lefort and Gauchet write:

> does not come to divide the social into "parts" foreign to each other: through it, the social relates to itself, by being separated, and acquires its identity. It appears as such. Not that it is then given a singular nature of "something" which we would have to specify. Open in its being to its present-absent foundation, *the social is a continuous donation and institution of itself* (*ibid.*: 13).

From the relationship that a given society has with its division, the two authors continue, it is possible to trace the profile of different forms of society: those that accept internal conflict, such as democracy, and those that deny it, rejecting it in a transcendent otherness as in the case of "primitive" societies, or erasing it in the illusion of the One, as do homogeneous, totalitarian societies. Each of these forms of society has a different image of power. While in a democracy power is an empty place, in totalitarianism it is illusorily embodied by the chief, the *Egocrat*, the party, the people, the One.

In short, the idea propounded by Lefort and Gauchet, spokesmen for the entire group centering around *Textures*, is clear: the social is a self-instituted symbolic field continually bisected by a structural, original, and insuperable division. The dimension of "the political" (*le politique*), the two authors' incisive term for any society's perpetual conflict for self-interpretation, is not superstructure or ideology as Marxism believes.[4] It does not depend on any objective underlying level and certainly not on economic and material structure. Indeed, the economy does not subsist in itself outside the symbolic and political dimensions. It is always internal to them, in the interpretation. In short, according to Lefort, Gauchet and the *Textures* group, *le politique* is instituting. It establishes the social through the interpretation, through the signification of division, of internal conflict, and with otherness.

The last issue of *Textures* came out in 1975, the same year that saw the publication of Cornelius Castoriadis's *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987) – a milestone in the development of the theory of the institution of social. The issue opened with a section devoted to several Soviet dissidents, where Pierre Clastres contributed a short article on Anatoly Marchenko (Clastres 1975). This collaboration with the journal, however minor it might seem, was neither occasional nor fortuitous. It signals a deep theoretical and political affinity. Indeed, Clastres had long been close to members of the editorial board of *Textures*, with whom, as we have seen, he later continued to collaborate in *Libre*. As I wrote in the introduction, his intellectual history is intertwined on several occasions with Lefort, Castoriadis, and comrades. It is no accident that, tracing the contours of what I have called the theory of the institution of the social, some of the most characteristic elements of Clastres' thought emerged: the critique of Marxism (Clastres 1980: 157-170, 2012: 15-20), the opposition to any division between the leaders and the led, the revaluation of the sphere of the political as instituting the social, the focus on the role of division and conflict in the construction of social identity, and the symbolic role of power.

However, Clastres did not quietly insert himself among the other members of the group, simply following its theoretical project. He brought some new elements and proposed a personal and original interpretation. His

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[4] Lefort (1988: 11) states: "The political is thus revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured. It appears in the sense that the process whereby society is ordered and unified across its divisions becomes visible. It is obscured in the sense that the locus of politics (the locus in which parties compete and in which a general agency of power takes shape and is reproduced) becomes defined as particular, while the principle which generates the overall configuration is concealed".

participation in *Textures* and then, above all, in *Libre* almost marked a turning point in the group of thinkers. His work became a common reference, a leap forward in defining the political's instituting capacity. Clastres became a key figure for Gauchet in particular: for the development of his research and his interpretation of the theory of the institution of the social.[5]

In the following pages, I will show what new theoretical tools Clastres brought first to the *Textures* group and then to *Libre* and, more generally, to the theory of the institution of the social. In telling this story, the starting point can only be Lefort's work.

2. Lefort: History and the symbolic dimension of the social

During the early 1950s, Claude Lefort became deeply interested in anthropological studies. In the library of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, he read the classics of French sociology (Marcel Mauss, Roger Bastide, Claude Lévi-Strauss), British functionalism (Bronislaw Malinowski, Edward Evans-Pritchard) and American culturalism (Ralph Linton, Abram Kardiner, Gregory Bateson).[6] He came to these readings in an attempt to understand the social dimension beyond the limits imposed by Marxism and structuralism. As he states in a 1951 article on Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*, he questions the father of structuralism

> for having identified in society rules rather than *behaviors*, to borrow Mauss's expressions; for having artificially posited a total rationality from which groups and men are reduced to an abstract function, rather than grounding it in the concrete relations that actually bind them to one another (Lefort 1978: 34).

Lefort's attempt, we might say, is to fill structures with meaning and action; to view structures not as a mute, mathematizable lattice, but as networks of meanings intrinsically connected to social praxis and conflicts. Anthropology thus helps Lefort to see the social in dynamic terms, as a "culturing culture", that is "the constantly repeated operation through which a society refers to itself and thereby confirms its teleology" (*ibid.*: 55).[7]

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[5] In this group, Miguel Abensour is the scholar who, along with Gauchet, is clearest about his debt to Clastres' work. However, I will not be able to consider his views in these pages, as the core of the theory of the institution of the social was the work of Lefort and Gauchet, together with Castoriadis. However, the latter's references to Clastres are less explicit.

[6] On the importance of anthropology in Lefort's thought see Vibert 2023. On this subject and more generally on the work of Lefort, I would like to refer to Di Pierro 2023 in addition to Flynn 2005 and Poltier 1998.

[7] Lefort (1978: 51) writes: "Generally speaking, what ethnologists seek to understand and interpret, in contact with so-called primitive societies, is a culture, a complex of institutions,

In this framework, an article that appeared in 1952, *Society without History and Historicity*, is particularly relevant (*ibid.*: 46-77). The starting point is a critique of the rationalist philosophies of history of Husserl, Hegel and Marx. According to Lefort, they are united by a totalizing and ethnocentric view of history that reserves its plaudits for Western societies, with their continual internal change and progress, and dismisses all others as stagnant and irrational. Through the methods and studies offered by anthropology, Lefort sets out to show that historicity is a purely cultural and political issue, and that, as a result, a definite dynamic social project can be discerned beneath the surface of stagnation: society's incessant referring to itself.

Gregory Bateson's work provides Lefort with the tools needed to clarify this point.[8] The British anthropologist examined a paradigmatic case of a stagnant society: the society of Bali, which is organized from a fundamental imperative: to maintain stability and immobility. In pursuit of this end, this society banned all forms of opposition: disputes were resolved by penalties that the disputants agreed to pay should they ever speak again, and wars were dealt with by ceasing all relations between rival groups: the latter surrounded themselves with fortifications designed not to prevent others' attacks, but to make all interaction impossible. This same attitude is repeated in all aspects of social life: from music to dance, from strict hierarchical divisions to child-rearing. This disposition to immobility and social stability goes hand in hand with particular conceptions of time and space. All respond to the same need: to maintain stability, and banish change.

The rejection of conflict thus appears to result from a particular view of the world and social relations. For Balinese communities, conflict threatens the entire representation of the world, the overall framework, structure, and references that give meaning to personal relationships, space and time. According to Lefort, the case of Bali invites us to link a particular historicity with a corresponding type of sociality. It urges us not to define social stagnation as the effect of a natural or material condition but as the product of a culture or "sense-making", on which a given conception of social relations, but also of space, time and history, depends. Stagnation, in short, is the consequence of a social and political organization that blocks internal division within society and, through it, all forms of change.

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practices, and beliefs, which do not make sense except through their mutual relationship, and which constitute a possible mode of human coexistence. This shift in perspective is remarkable in that it prevents us from holding onto a static view of the social, and forces us to be attentive to becoming, however indeterminate it may be".

[8] Lefort mainly refers to Bateson 1949, Lowie 1949, and Bateson and Mead 1942.

According to Lefort, a political question lies at the basis of any society's relationship with history and with its own organization. There is a choice, a kind of project, at the bottom of every society. From this choice different relations with time and change, different "forms of history" follow.

Rather than as societies lacking history or that had not yet arrived at history – as they were usually described by tradition – "the nature of primitive societies testified at best to a rejection of history" (Lefort 2000: 213). They design themselves, through unconscious and continuously repeated choices, to avoid internal division and the historical becoming associated with it.

Another text of fundamental importance in Lefort's intellectual journey came out in 1955, the same year he attended Lévi-Strauss's course at the Sorbonne: *L'aliénation comme concept sociologique*, or *Alienation as a Sociological Concept* (Lefort 1978: 78-112). This time British anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard's studies of the Nuer population provide a useful case study. Nuer society is primarily devoted to pastoralism and is characterized by a special symbolic and imaginary relationship with cows. Cattle are the main source of wealth, the mediation through which social relations are structured. They give the owner a definite rank and status in the community. They establish roles and ties. According to Evans-Pritchard's studies, all of Nuer society is structured through objectification whereby social ties and obligations are perceived through the mediation of cows.

Given this framework, Lefort asks whether it makes sense to define this society as alienated. Does the fact that the Nuer make the cow their reality constitute alienation, inasmuch as it deprives them of a consciousness of their objective existence? The French thinker's answer is quite clear: there is no basis for arguing that bovine mediation hides or distorts prior human relations, simply because, from an endogenous point of view, there are no relations that prescind from such mediation or predate it. Only absolute knowledge from outside Nuer society could so clearly distinguish between reality and its distortion. The cow is the background of meaning within which Nuer society understands itself and to which all socializing activities refer. Social relations are therefore not veiled by the objectification of the animal. Rather, they are at the same time expressed by that mediation and constructed through it. They are the same thing. Nuer society, Lefort concludes, is exactly what it appears to be: its appearance is its reality. The cow is the form and medium through which social relations are constructed, explicated and signified, exactly as the commodity is the medium through which relations are constructed and signified in capitalist society. This is not where alienation can be found. Lefort concludes:

There is no justification for considering our present-day social existence as a single image detached from the background of a possible human society. In other words, all activities are socializing, part of a single drama, and they produce or reproduce to varying degrees the overall composition: that is why the social is the real (*ibid.*: 97).

The general sociology course taught at the Université de Caen between 1966 and 1967 and entitled *Dimensions du champ social* is the last stage of this brief reconstruction of Lefort's theory. In his lectures, Lefort moves through the literature offered by sociology and anthropology, from Mauss to Weber, from Durkheim to Parsons, with language that is, however, particularly imbued with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. The course synthesizes some of the elements that had guided Lefort's research in the previous two decades. His work already clearly turns toward defining democratic society and its difference from totalitarianism. The starting point is clear and reiterated: against all scientism and all economism we must read the social as a *champ*, as a total dimension of meaning commanded by a political question. The course thus ends by stating that:

the social field presents itself to us as already signifying from part to part, already symbolic, and we can only spell out the articulations. As soon as we claim to reconstruct it, we hide this first situation from the institution which is the very condition of any interpretation.[9]

We can draw some conclusions at this point. It is clear that as early as the 1950s Lefort builds his theory around two pivotal elements. First, he argues that the social is a symbolic totality of meaning that does not rest on a deeper reality, on facts. There is no separation between structure and superstructure (Vibert 2024). The "truth" of the social is not in the economic basis but in its very symbolic dimension, from which it is impossible to escape. In short: the social is the real. Consequently, he believes that the organization of a given society and its relationship to history in particular depend on the symbolic dimension and on the relationship that society itself establishes with conflict and division. Against a tradition of thought that reduces primitive societies "without history" to societies that have remained at a standstill in a primordial stage of historical development or outside the rationality of history, Lefort thus shows how their structure depends on a political question: they are structured against change.

However, Lefort never goes so far as to investigate the origin; he never tries to define the sort of unconscious choice that establishes a certain

[9] I take this quote from the typescript of the lectures provided to me by Marcel Gauchet.

relationship with history and division. And he has a precise theoretical reason for not doing so: following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, he believes that the origin is ineffable, unattainable. It always escapes, it is always already involved in the relation of interpretation.[10] Therefore, it is not possible to locate the choice of societies about themselves, because it is always already in the division, in the symbolic, it is already always a political question. Moreover, according to Lefort and Merleau-Ponty (1988: 56 and 2010), the institution of the social is as much acted upon as it is suffered by society: it develops in an unconscious dynamic involving activity and passivity.

By the late 1960s, Lefort systematized these elements in a broader and more complex theoretical framework that delimited the contours of the theory of the symbolic institution of the social that would be explicated by the contributors to *Textures* and *Libre*. During the same decade, his work on Niccolò Machiavelli, on Western political modernity, and his analysis of democratic society increasingly pushed Lefort to focus on the symbolic dimension of social division and social conflict and led him to a definition of power that goes beyond mere coercion.

In this outline of Lefort's path, it is not difficult to see several features shared with the work of Pierre Clastres. Moreover, it would not be too far-fetched to say that one of the sources of Clastres' thinking can be found in Lefort's theory – which the anthropologist read as early as the 1950s and 1960s in the pages of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, *Les Temps Modernes* and the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, and then heard in the classrooms of the Sorbonne.[11]

Reading the texts written during the 1960s and collected in *Society Against the State*, we might almost think that Clastres radicalizes some of the theses proposed by Lefort in the previous two decades:[12] the critique of Marxist economism and the corresponding reassessment of the political dimension, the critique of the traditional reading of primitive societies as societies that had stopped at an earlier and primitive stage of development, the highlighting of the relationship between politics and historicity, or even the relationship between conflict and the organization of society.

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[10] On the relationship between Lefort and Merleau-Ponty see Di Pierro (2019 and 2024), Poirier (2022), Dodeman (2019), Gerçek (2017), Flynn (2008), and Labelle (2003).

[11] Not forgetting, of course, Clastres' references in anthropology. In this connection, see Vibert 2020. Obviously the work of Lévi-Strauss is a central reference. As early as the 1950s the father of structural anthropology began to distinguish between cold and warm societies in a line of thought that has more than a mere affinity with Lefort and Clastres himself.

[12] It is hardly necessary to repeat that Clastres' references were also and above all in anthropology and that he was radicalizing even Lévi-Strauss' theses.

At the same time, it seems that Clastres' radicalization also moves away from Lefort's work, proposing something new. While as early as the 1960s, through anthropology and then even more so through the study of Machiavelli's work, Lefort had begun to take an interest in the dimension of power, Clastres in the same years proposed a clearer formulation of the function of power as a symbolic pole that will be central both in Lefort's later thinking and in the theory of the institution of the social. What else is the savage chief if not the medium through which society speaks to itself, represents itself, and recognizes itself (Clastres 1972 and 1989)? Similarly, although his thought could lead in this same direction, Lefort had never explicitly written that "political power is *universal*, immanent to social reality" (Clastres 1989: 22) and that

> all societies, whether archaic or not, are political, even if the political is expressed in many voices, even if their meaning is not immediately decipherable, and even if one has to solve the riddle of a "powerless" power (*ibid.*).

It is precisely this continuation at a distance that brings these two reflections closer together and makes Clastres' thought interesting in Lefort's eyes. Several years later, Lefort stated that although when he met him he was already engaged in a reflection on the political and historicity, Clastres' work

> opened a path along which I had not advanced. It was not the rejection of history, or that of social conflict, that he judged to be at the basis of the primitive community but, rather, the refusal of a power liable to detach itself from this community, the rejection of an internal division that in the end rendered possible the advent of the State. The question he was articulating – or, to say it better, discovering – at the heart of primitive society was the question of the political (Lefort 2000: 214).

In short, thanks to Clastres, Lefort's reflection on history, on the relationship between history and culture, on the dimension of the political, becomes a reflection about power, about the State. In this way, the denial of conflict Lefort had already encountered in Balinese society and in societies "without history" can be understood as a rejection of separate power and internal division. However, according to Clastres, this rejection implies a change of perspective: it implies that "original choice" for equality which supposedly characterizes savage societies and which Lefort had wanted to avoid.

We could thus say that the encounter with Clastres gave Lefort new tools for defining the political dimension of societies, the symbolic pole of power, and for further reflection on social division. However, the work of the two thinkers proceeded in parallel, never really meeting. Lefort, in

fact, never assumed the perspective of "societies against the State" and always avoided pointing to an original choice for equality as the foundation of savage societies. Likewise, their work about "division" also took the two scholars in different directions. According to Lefort, Clastres never understood the role of division in primitive societies. He did not understand that social unity depended on a division with an unattainable otherness that defined the social from an outside and which was made visible, for example, in the violence of the rites (Lefort 2000: 207-234, Clastres 1989: 177-188).

Lefort's theory turned toward understanding modernity and democracy, that is, the history of the symbolic revolution that changed the connotations of power, voiding it and making it an empty place traversed by conflict, by social division (Lefort 1986 and 1988). In this history, in which equality is a modern addition, there is no room for the distinction between "a society against the State – free, egalitarian society – and all other societies, ones including a State, which supposedly are established and maintained to benefit a complicitous relationship between the desire for oppression and the desire for servitude" (Lefort 2000: 216). In this idea of history, moreover, there is no room for choice.[13]

In concluding this section, it is interesting to note that Clastres in the 1960s seems to have grasped the same theoretical question addressed by Lefort and other authors such as Castoriadis and Gauchet: the question of the instituting dimension of the political. But he interprets it as part of a personal approach. By inserting himself in the research group centering on *Textures* and then *Libre*, he produces an effect, he brings new tools to the theory of the institution of the social. It is precisely these effects that we must follow and understand. To do so, we must move on to the next stage and analyze the work of another protagonist of this debate in the early 1970s: Marcel Gauchet.

3. Gauchet: Decision and religion

As we saw earlier, the first issue of *Textures* in 1971 opened with an article signed by Lefort and Gauchet entitled *Sur la démocratie. Le politique et l'institution du social* (Lefort and Gauchet 1971). The article consists of the (heavily reworked) notes Gauchet took at the sociology course taught by Lefort at the Université de Caen between 1966 and 1967, and can be

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[13] Lefort openly criticizes Clastres' Manichean division between stateless societies and all others, as well as his conception of division. See Lefort 2000: 207-235 and 2007: 383-388.

considered a kind of first manifesto of the theory of the institution of the social. Indeed, it is the first systematic presentation of some elements Lefort had been working on for at least two decades, combined, however, with the work of Gauchet, Castoriadis, and Clastres. As such, it is the result of a collective effort, first in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and then in the *Cercle Saint Just* organized by Lefort from 1968 around the legacy of Merleau-Ponty.

In this article, the social is presented for the first time as a symbolic institution, as a "continuous donation and institution of itself" (*ibid.*: 13). The authors clearly state that the social is traversed by a double division: one that distinguishes it from power and another that splits it internally into opposing moods, in class conflict, in the conflict between different interpretations of power. Lefort and Gauchet delve into the thesis expounded by the former in his work on Machiavelli (Lefort 1972) – which was to appear in the following year but on which Lefort had been working for a decade – and make it clear that conflict is the driving force behind the institution of the social.

Power is presented here as a symbolic pole: it is the place where and through which the self-representation of a given society is reflected, the point toward which *questionnement* and conflict are directed. It is, at the same time, the common reference that makes society cohesive by sublimating conflict itself. In this sense, the image of power is intimately linked to conflict, to the acceptance or non-acceptance of social division. Then, in the democratic form of society, the locus of power is "empty". Not because it is not exercised or temporarily possessed by anyone, but because it is always questioned and never consubstantial with any instance or subject. In totalitarianism, by contrast, the locus of power is full, saturated by the body of the people or the leader, and division is denied.

The roots of these categories and the theory presented in the 1971 article undoubtedly lie in the course taught at Caen in 1966-1967 and in Lefort's work in the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, the article presents a kind of gap that shows that Gauchet and, through him, Clastres, made a far from insignificant contribution. Some paragraphs explicitly echo the theses of Clastres that Gauchet had begun reading at that time (Lefort and Gauchet 1971: 26). Not only: it could be said that in systematizing some of the categories originally proposed by Lefort into a coherent theory, the article radicalizes some aspects and at the same time altered their general meaning to some extent. It is not by chance that Lefort himself never wanted to republish this text, feeling that it was not his own. Not by chance, again, the two authors clashed about their respective contributions to the text, as Gauchet felt that his work had not been sufficiently acknowledged by Lefort (Gauchet 2003: 29).

While the text generally presents a radicalization and systematization of some elements of Lefort's theory, one point is particularly prominent: the category of Decision. In the pages of *Sur la démocratie*, we read that the institution of the social depends on an "Establishing Decision" that concerns the relationship that a given society has with division (Lefort and Gauchet 1971: 20). The acceptance of otherness and conflict will correspond to a historical society in which power can be contested. By contrast, the rejection of division outside the social field will produce a stagnant society in which an unchallengeable foundation models a homogeneous society. Here conflict does not produce movement. Of course, as we have shown, as early as the 1950s Lefort had already emphasized a political question at the bottom of society's relationship to historicity and division. However, he avoided pointing to an original and foundational Political Decision.[14] Instead, the 1971 article argues that the very idea of an establishing Decision brings us to the heart of the enigma of the political, of the relationship to division and power that defines every society. It reads thus:

> The *Decision* to claim knowledge about itself and to order the collectivity according to its affirmation, the decision to proclaim the purpose pursued by the whole collectivity as conforming to that of the social itself, to embody and assume the sense of the social – The *Decision* to keep the identity of the collectivity open, not to cover it with a name, not to enunciate goals that should mobilize and bring together the efforts of all: in either of these fundamental *dispositions*, a political regime is established. A political regime through which a society relates to the structure of being of the social – a relationship, in which its very viability is at stake (*ibid.*: 19).

This idea, which Lefort will never take up in his later texts, was clearly contributed by Gauchet, who in this way interprets and radicalizes the master's thinking by using Pierre Clastres' work in his own way. With the term Decision, Gauchet translates the idea of a "sociological act" that defines the choice of a given society in its relation to division, to power: that choice which, according to Clastres, organizes savage societies against the State (Clastres 1989: 43). In this sense, Gauchet attempts to read "societies without history" described by Lefort, as "*societies against history*", thus naming that origin, that act of foundation.

Gauchet takes up the category of Decision in a text important to his trajectory and interpretation of the theory of the institution of the social. This article, entitled *Politique et société: la leçon des sauvages*, appeared in the

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[14] Lefort takes up this category in Lefort 1972, but not later.

last two issues of *Textures* between 1975 and 1976. From the first lines, it openly declares the debt to Clastres' thought:

> Clastres's reflection makes a decisive contribution to the challenge of our time to rethink the whole of history in new terms. It does so by breaking with the inherited conceptions about the "origins" of the historical adventure, precisely, around the "primitive" state of human societies (Gauchet 2005: 91).

Clastres' works, Gauchet argues, highlighted how every society is political and organizes itself around a conception of power. In this way, through his study of primitive societies, the anthropologist emphasized that power does not coincide with coercion and the use of force. On the contrary, the powerless power of savages demonstrates the form of power in its negation, making it clear that powerless power is nonetheless political power. In this definition of power, its function as a symbolic pole, i.e., a point through which society reflects, elaborates, and expresses its Decision, emerges clearly. In the powerless power of the chief and in the lack of coercion of his word, savage societies signify their choice against the State, against the possibility of internal division and, according to Clastres, against the possibility of a power separated from society (*ibid.*: 102).

Going beyond Clastres' reasoning or extending it, Gauchet thus argues that through power the reflexive dimension of the institution of the social became evident (*ibid.*: 104). But this, he continues, applies as much to primitive societies as to modern and contemporary ones (*ibid.*: 103). Each society institutes itself by interpreting itself, by reflecting itself through the image of power: while "savage societies" organize themselves around a powerless power that averts internal division, modern state societies structure themselves through a separate and coercive power that makes the division manifest. From this perspective, the power of contemporary democratic society appears to be crossed by a division that it accepts, splitting the social and organizing it through internal conflict.

In this way, Gauchet places Clastres' analysis against the broader backdrop of a history of the emergence of division, i.e., the State. This, however, completely changes the game. Once the reflexive root of each society is assumed, it is possible to see primitive societies as characterized by a particular relationship with power and division. According to Gauchet, these societies can reject separate power only by submitting to a further principle, to an unquestionable law that lies beyond the reach of the society itself. Only by reproducing such an unquestionable tradition can savage societies avert internal division. The powerless power of the savage chief described by Clastres thus appears to be an emanation of a different power: the "power of origin" removed from all human grasps. The Establishing Decision of Savage Societies, Gauchet writes,

consists fundamentally, we believe, in the establishment of a radical split between society and the principle of its order, with the supposed place of knowledge concerning the reasons and purposes of social organization. It is through this total subtraction of the social order from the current taking of men, by the refusal instituted to let them recognize themselves as "inventors" of their society that this one guarantees itself in its refusal of a separate power (*ibid.*: 106).

These societies choose the imaginary to avoid coercive power. They divest themselves of their ordering principle to avoid internal division. They subject themselves to an intangible otherness to prevent it from breaching the boundaries of society (*ibid.*: 112). This intangible otherness is the mythical origin of society, located in an unattainable temporal dimension.

Thus, Gauchet's recall of Clastres seems to completely overturn the anthropologist's analysis. The powerless power of savage societies becomes the bearer and word-bearer of an indisputable higher power, of a rejected otherness that subjects these societies. They thus are not characterized by autonomy, self-government, and indivision, but by heteronomy, by the division from their ordering principle. They are subjected to myth, to the sacred, to what Gauchet begins to delineate as religion (*ibid.*: 110).

However, Gauchet's analysis proceeds further. According to him, subjection to otherness is not restricted savage societies. On the contrary, this relationship with otherness, this "religious" structure, is a common feature of most societies in human history. From this point of view, Gauchet writes:

> In this way, the full story is to be told of figures of the supernatural in their correlation with the modes of domination, from the success of primitive societies in warding off domination by the supernatural, up to the total affirmation of the domination of the State with the end of any religious legitimation of social organization. A full story that highlights the continued resistance of societies to the State far beyond the emergence of the State, which shows that playing invisibly in the systems of legitimizing power is a means of neutralizing power (*ibid.*: 117).

In this story of the relationship with otherness and division, primitive societies are not the exception. The exception is the contemporary democratic society that arose out of Western modernity. Like Lefort, Gauchet breaks away from Clastres' schematism that divides state and stateless societies to consider the emergence of the State in a broader history: a political history of religion that Gauchet will first present in *Disenchantment of the World*, published in 1985 (Gauchet 1999).

According to Gauchet, the relationship with otherness that characterizes savage societies does not disappear with the appearance of the State. Rather, it is intimately linked to it. With the State, otherness

becomes visible but continues to structure societies from outside. The ordering principle is still away from society. Like savage societies, religious State societies are heteronomous. Only with modernity, Gauchet affirms, does the discourse of legitimation of power and social organization depart from the heteronomy dimension, from myth and religion. Only with modernity do we see an autonomous society capable of appropriating its ordering principle, of discussing it (Gauchet 2005: 113). When any guarantor of the established order disappears, society can finally recognize itself as self-instituted. Human history is thus not divided between societies against the State and State societies but between societies of heteronomy and autonomy. The discriminating principle is not the acceptance or non-acceptance of separate power, but the concealment or acceptance of social division. Only from this point of view, Gauchet argues, can the various types of societies be analyzed (*ibid.*: 163), and both democratic society and the novelty of totalitarianism be thoroughly understood (*ibid.*: 115-116).

The initial closeness to Clastres' theory gives way to distance. If the anthropologist's hypothesis about the political institution of the social and his analysis of power and division seems to clarify some central points to Gauchet, his analysis then settles back into the path traced by Lefort – toward a study of modernity and democracy – and by Castoriadis – in interpreting democracy as a society of autonomy – but away from the division between savage and state societies proposed by Clastres. Nothing could be further from the idea of a choice for indivision.

Some conclusions

This analysis of Lefort and Gauchet's work helps us understand Clastres' role in the group of thinkers who addressed the theory of the institution of the social in the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. Although Lefort had already fielded many of the pivotal elements of this theory in the 1950s and 1960s, Clastres' ideas were disruptive and enabled the group and some of its major members to clarify some central points. They helped Lefort and Gauchet define power in terms of a symbolic pole and highlight a political question at the bottom of every society and its organization.

At the same time, neither author seems to have fully followed Clastres' proposal. Both Lefort and Gauchet critiqued the distinction between anti-State and State societies and its analytical validity, moving toward understanding modernity as a society of autonomy, of the acceptance of division. Beneath this distance lies a different analysis of division itself. This difference is evident both in the reading of *The Society against the State*

and in more recent works in which Clastres reflects directly on this issue through the theme of war. Unlike Lefort and Gauchet, the anthropologist does not thematize the subjugating power of otherness pushed outside the social body, either in his analysis of the Guarani prophets, or in defining the centripetal force of war (Clastres 1980: 171-208, 1989: 157-169). He thus chooses a different direction, distant from the analysis of totalitarianism and democracy embraced by Lefort, Gauchet or Castoriadis.

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